

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE FIRE DEMON





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
FIRE DEMON**

In search of a suitable mask for a Halloween party, Pete meets Aaron Moore. The creepy author is threatened by a Fire Demon and fears for his life. Jupiter, Pete and Bob, the three successful detectives, pay a visit to Blackstone—Moore's haunted house. The author explains that the emergence of the demon is heralded by four threatening incidents. After that, a mysterious mask will appear, through which the Fire Demon will materialize—on Halloween night. Then the author will die. Can The Three Investigators fight off the demon?

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Fire Demon

*Original German text by
André Marx*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

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Die drei ???: Der Feuerteufel

(The Three ???: The Fire Devil)

by

André Marx

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Cover art by

Aiga Rasch

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1, In the Chamber of Horrors

The zombie stared at him with only one bulging eye. His skin was peeling off and hung from his skull in bloody shreds. The toothless mouth grinned and Pete thought he could smell his stinking breath.

Shuddering, he turned away—and looked into the face of a werewolf. Next to it was a vampire with shiny bloody fangs. The room was filled with figures worse than his most horrible nightmares. From all sides toothless mouths grinned, red glowing eyes sparkled, pale skulls shimmered. They followed every movement of the visitors without moving themselves.

Pete recognized some characters from the movies—Darth Vader, Freddy Kruger, *Alien*, and the killer from *Scream*. Others, however, had nothing whatsoever to do with movies. They had sprung from a completely different world, a mythical and extremely dark one. Their features were rough, carved from dark wood and reminded less of Hollywood monsters than of ancient gods.

Pete looked intrigued into the black eye sockets of a mask as a hand lay on his shoulder. He winced and drove around. Behind him stood a girl with short dark hair and grinned at him. She was maybe a little younger than him. Around her neck she wore an eye-catching silver medallion with mysterious symbols. For a moment she squeezed her eyes together behind her little round glasses as if she was thinking, but then the grin returned. “What can I do for you?” she asked.

“Don’t scare me like that next time,” Pete asked. “It went right through me.”

“I know. Works every time.”

“Does that surprise you?” Pete asked. “In this chamber of horrors you get the creeps just by looking around. It’s really creepy here. Do you work here?”

She nodded and reached her hand out to him. “Roxanne Elfman. The shop is owned by Kathy Goldenberg, the only mask specialist in Santa Monica. She’s my neighbour. Once in a while, after school, I help her in the store.”

“Pete Crenshaw,” Pete introduced himself.

“I know.”

He frowned.

Roxanne smiled. “You’re one of The Three Investigators from Rocky Beach, right?”

“Uh... Yes. Have we met?”

“I know you,” said Roxanne. “From the newspaper. I’ve read about you several times. You guys just solved that museum case.”

Pete nodded, not without pride. “True. There was an article about it in the *Los Angeles Times*.” He didn’t mention that Bob’s father had written the article.

“Surely it must be thrilling to be a detective, isn’t it?” Roxanne asked.

“Well,” Pete replied, embarrassed and felt that he blushed a little. “We’re just doing this on our spare time. We still go to school, and mostly we slip into our cases rather accidentally. I, for one, am not exactly craving it.”

“Wouldn’t you like to tell me a little about your adventures?” Roxanne’s eyes glowed.

“Well...” Pete looked at his watch. “I don’t really have much time and just wanted to look around a little because these masks are really fantastic. Where do they all come from?”

Roxanne had trouble hiding her disappointment. But then she raised her arms and made a sweeping gesture that included the shop and the whole world. “From all over the world,” she proudly proclaimed, as if it all belonged to her. “Mrs Goldenberg used to travel a lot and collect masks from all over the world. At first, it was just a collector’s passion, but then it gradually became a business. She’s also a craftswoman. Her workshop is right next door. Some of the masks here were made by her—that Venetian one over there with the feathers for example.”

“I bet they sell well,” Pete surmised.

“All right. Most people aren’t interested in it,” Roxanne said. “Mrs Goldenberg makes her money in Hollywood, like so many others around here. Frankenstein or Dracula sell a hundred times better than the really valuable masks. Personally, I don’t like them much. But Mrs Goldenberg has to live on something.”

Pete felt caught, because he too had first looked at the faces he knew from the movies and had largely ignored all other masks. Now he let his gaze glide through the sales room once again and looked more closely at the other objects. Most of them had a more or less grim expression on their faces. He recognized African, Japanese and Indian motifs, but in most cases, Pete’s knowledge of the different cultures of the earth was not sufficient and he could not clearly assign the masks to any people.

“Unlike Frankenstein or Dracula, each has its own story. That’s what’s so special about these masks,” Roxanne explained. “Each one is unique, handmade, and some are well over a hundred years old.”

Roxanne grabbed Pete’s arm and pulled him over to show him a mask that had a place of honour on the wall, under a halogen spotlight—a friendly creature whose bird face was entwined with snakes looked down on it. It was pretty much the weirdest thing Pete had ever seen.

“A Kolam mask from Sri Lanka,” Roxanne explained. “My absolute favourite. It has a very special aura. Or the one in front—with it, the shaman of an African tribe conjured up his god of war.”

“Fascinating,” Pete remarked. “You’re pretty good at this, aren’t you?”

“When Mrs Goldenberg is free, she tells me all about her passion,” Roxanne explained. “Wouldn’t the Kolam mask make an excellent wall decoration for your room? Or your detective agency?” She smiled mischievously at him.

“I’m afraid that neither my pocket money nor what I earn mowing the lawn in the neighbour’s garden will be enough for this,” Pete replied with a glance at the small price tag. “But you naturally want to sell something, all right. As it happens, I really do need another creepy mask.”

“For Halloween,” Roxanne surmised.

Pete nodded. “I’ve been invited to a party and I think a one-eyed slimy face would look good on me.” He turned again to rubber movie masks and examined their prices. “These may not have a story of their own, but I can afford them.”

A wind chime rang when the shop door was opened and another customer came in—a tall, slender man with shoulder-length hair who, despite the warm weather, wore a long black coat with his collar turned up.

He was pale, as if he’d never been in the sun. Pete was spontaneously reminded of a character from a vampire movie. Roxanne looked around and beamed all over her face when she recognized the customer.

“Mr Moore!” Roxanne’s initial enthusiasm for Pete and The Three Investigators evaporated as quickly as it had flared up. “Good to see you!”

“Nice to be served by you, Roxanne,” replied Mr Moore. Neither of them paid any attention to Pete. A little offended, the Second Investigator turned away and looked at the masks again. So which one should he take—the zombie or Frankenstein’s monster? What would Jupiter and Bob be more afraid of? While he was thinking back and forth, he unintentionally followed the conversation between Roxanne and Mr Moore in the front part of the shop.

“Mrs Goldenberg isn’t in?” Mr Moore asked.

“She’ll be back in half an hour,” Roxanne replied. “Tomorrow’s the day, isn’t it? Your new book will be published tomorrow. I look forward to it!”

Mr Moore laughed. “They are not books, Roxanne, I tell you that every time. They are magazines.”

“To me, they are books,” Roxanne said. “I enjoyed your last one very much.”

“Not just you.”

“What does that mean? Have you been getting bags of fan mail again?”

There was another laugh. “I never have, dear Roxanne. No more than five letters a week. But no—this time the veneration of my works went beyond a simple letter.”

“Did someone send you flowers?”

“Regrettably not.” Mr Moore lowered his voice. “Someone set fire to my grave.”

Involuntarily Pete turned around. Moore caught his curious glance and Pete quickly looked away again.

“Maybe you should finish serving your customers before I tell you the story,” Mr Moore said quietly.

A moment later, Roxanne appeared next to Pete and asked in an emphatically friendly manner, “Have you decided?”

“Uh... Yes. I’ll take the zombie here.”

“Good.” Roxanne grabbed the rubber mask and hurried to the checkout counter with it. “Eleven dollars ninety-five.”

Pete reached for his wallet. Not exactly cheap for a bit of Halloween fun. But he had always had a weakness for zombies even though—or perhaps because—he dreaded them excessively. He paid and stowed the mask as cumbersome as possible in his backpack. But the calculation did not work out—instead of going back to Mr Moore and continuing to talk to him, Roxanne waited patiently with a smile on her face until Pete was finished.

“Maybe you’ll tell me more about yourself some other time?” Roxanne said with a smile.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Goodbye!”

“Goodbye,” mumbled Pete, nodded briefly to Mr Moore and left the shop.

Undecidedly he stopped on the sidewalk for a moment, then he looked at his watch. It was just before five. In a few minutes, he had an appointment with Bob and Jupiter at the salvage yard. Pete quickly swung onto his bike and set off towards Rocky Beach.

The Jones Salvage Yard belonged to Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda. It initially was a mere junkyard, but eventually it started handling many items in addition to junk. People came from very far to buy items that they could not get anywhere else.

Among all the stalls, the office building, the storeroom for the more valuable items and the huge piles of scrap metal that piled up everywhere, there was an old mobile home trailer.

It stood a bit off the beaten track next to an open-air workshop. All customers of the salvage yard assumed that the old, dusty monster was offered for sale, but nobody had seriously asked for it. And that was a good thing, because in fact, the headquarters of The Three Investigators was located inside—a fully equipped detective office with its own telephone and laboratory. This was the secret meeting place of Jupiter Jones, Bob Andrews and Pete Crenshaw. Many an exciting case had found its beginning and also its end here.

But today, Pete was in a hurry because another task was waiting for them. The Three Investigators had to free Rakos from the dark dungeon of the elf king, Tha-Eru, in which he had been imprisoned since yesterday.

Pete shot across the dusty driveway and brought his bike to a halt. Before he pushed it to Headquarters, he opened his backpack and took out the mask. He pulled it over his head, crept to the door of the trailer and tore it open with a loud roar. Through the small peep-holes he saw Bob and Jupiter sitting in front of the computer—completely unstirred.

The First Investigator, Jupiter Jones, turned around briefly, took a critical look at the zombie and growled: “It’s about time.”

“Boo!” Pete tried his luck with Bob.

“Wildly original, Pete,” Bob quipped. “Why are you so late?”

Disappointed, the Second Investigator pulled the mask off his head.

“You spoil all the fun.” Now they both began to laugh. “Why weren’t you scared?”

“Because I’ve already seen you through ‘See-All’,” Bob grinned, pointing to the periscope they had installed in the trailer. It was created with a combination of stove pipes and mirrors that protruded out from the roof so that they could look around the entire salvage yard without being seen, just like in a submarine.

“Nasty,” mumbled Pete, but then he had to laugh himself.

“But the zombie comes cool, right?” Jupe asked. “For the Halloween party at Jeffrey’s?”

“Yeah,” Pete said. “Are you guys going?”

“Sure,” Bob said. “I’m gonna take a photo of Jupe’s face, blow it up and make me a Jupiter Jones mask.”

“Hardly anyone will notice the difference,” Pete mocked, looking at Jupiter’s rather plump stature. “I just bought this zombie mask in Santa Monica at an absolutely crazy store. And also, I overheard a very strange conversation there.”

“Can it wait till later? I want to start now!” Jupe pointed to the computer monitor, over which various question marks in the colours white, red and blue wandered. It was his first self-programmed screensaver, of which he was very proud.

“Exactly!” Bob agreed and reached for the joystick. “Here we go, Tha-Eru’s gonna get some action!”

Pete opened the fridge and drank half a bottle of water empty before worriedly saying: “We’re addicts, you know that? For the past four days we have been hanging in front of this game. And there is no end in sight. My homework suffers, my training suffers and my parents are already complaining because I am never at home.”

“Well, I think it’s cool,” Bob rejoiced. “Finally the sequel to ‘Hunt’ has been released and we can experience exciting adventures again for days and nights! When we get through the game, that’s when it ends.”

“Until Part III appears,” reminded Jupiter. “Get started!”

When Bob loaded the game, Pete reported in short sentences what he had experienced in the mask shop. “It’s a strange thing when a complete stranger recognizes you. Are we really that famous?”

“Don’t be a megalomaniac, Pete,” Bob warned. “As long as there’s not a bunch of screaming girls waiting outside your door in the morning to drive you to school, you don’t have to worry.”

Pete waved it off. “Never mind. Actually, I’m concerned with something quite different. What could this man have meant when he said that someone had set his grave on fire?”

“Are you sure you didn’t mishear?” Jupiter checked.

“Most definitely,” Pete affirmed. “Don’t you find that kind of weird?”

“Hear, hear! Pete smells a mystery,” Bob quipped.

“Don’t make fun of it, Bob,” Pete said. “The guy was really weird. So pale. And then he wore those weird clothes. He had something to hide, otherwise he would have kept talking. I think he was a writer or something. Anyway, they were talking about his books.”

Jupiter’s ears were wide open. “Wait a minute. What did you say his name was? Moore? Maybe it was Aaron Moore.”

“Who is Aaron Moore?” Bob asked.

“Better known as Night Hawk, the author of the *Demon Zone* series. I read an interview with him recently. He lives near here. The article should still be flying around here somewhere, and there was also a photo.” Perplexed, the First Investigator looked around Headquarters.

Mountains of paper grew up everywhere—old newspapers and magazines, computer printouts and files. “By the way, we really need to clean up,” Jupe said.

“*Demon Zone*? Those are dreadful novels,” said Bob scornfully. “Literary trash.”

Suddenly, the phone rang.

“Whoever it is, get rid of him,” Bob said. “I want to play the game now.”

The First Investigator answered. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking... Yes, he’s right here, hold on.” He handed Pete the receiver. “For you.”

Pete threw a questioning glance at him, but Jupiter shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes, Pete Crenshaw here?”

“Hi, this is Roxanne.”

“Who?”

“Roxanne. From the mask shop.”

“Uh...”

“I think I have a case for The Three Investigators.”

2. A New Case

“Sorry? How did you get this number?” Pete asked, puzzled.

“From your mother,” Roxanne replied.

Pete didn’t understand. “What?”

Roxanne laughed. “I recognized you, remember? And I know you and your friends are from Rocky Beach. So I looked in the phone book and called your house. Then your mother gave me this number. Where are you? In your detective agency?”

“Uh... Yes.” Pete stuttered.

“Sorry about earlier,” Roxanne said. “I didn’t mean to just leave you standing there. That was very rude. But then Mr Moore came and—”

“And you suddenly didn’t have any time left,” Pete summed things up. Then he bent over the desk and turned on the loudspeaker so Bob and Jupiter could listen in. “What is it now? What did you mean, a case for us?”

“Mr Moore is in trouble,” Roxanne explained. “He’s terrorized by a stranger. Probably a psychopath, a deranged fan. You see, you must know that Mr Moore is—”

—“A writer,” Pete interrupted her. He was still offended by Roxanne’s behaviour and calmly continued: “He writes *Demon Zone*, those dreadful novels. Literary trash.”

“They’re not trash,” Roxanne replied. Her mood suddenly changed. “They are excellent novels.”

“Magazines,” Pete corrected her.

“Have you ever read a *Demon Zone* book?”

“Uh... no,” Pete confessed.

“Well, then, don’t make any judgements,” Roxanne said, a bit annoyed. “What now—are you taking the case?”

“We don’t even know exactly what this is all about.”

“Around a burning grave,” Roxanne said. “But you already know that.”

“How did you—”

“You were listening in, weren’t you?” Roxanne laughed. “I’m not angry with you. I guess a real detective can’t help himself. But perhaps it’s best if Mr Moore tells you the whole story himself. I’ve already told him about you. He wants to use the services of The Three Investigators and awaits your visit. It’s urgent, perhaps even his life is threatened.”

“This all sounds very mysterious.” Pete took a look at Bob and Jupiter, but they only shrugged their shoulders. “All right. We’ll talk about it sometime.”

“As I read in the papers that your motto is ‘We’ll Investigate Anything’,” Roxanne reminded him. “I hope that’s not just a figure of speech. Call me when you’ve decided. Then we can visit Mr Moore together.”

Pete sighed heavily. “All right.” She gave him her phone number, then Pete hung up and looked at his two friends perplexed. “So?”

“A burning grave at Night Hawk and a psychopath who wants to get at him,” Jupiter summarized with shining eyes. “Sounds promising.”

“Sounds crazy if you ask me,” Bob objected.

“That too,” the First Investigator admitted. “But that’s the beauty of it. I’d love to know what’s behind this story.”

“This means we must let Rakos rot in the dungeon of the elf king,” Bob surmised.

“He won’t run away from us,” Jupiter reassured him. “I think we should visit Mr Moore. It might be interesting to meet the author of *Demon Zone*, don’t you think? Pete?”

“Since when do I get asked?” Pete replied. “Well, as far as I’m concerned, we can stop by this guy’s place—just to show you he’s really weird and I didn’t exaggerate.”

“So you can see Roxanne again,” Bob mocked. “That’s the real reason for your surprisingly quick approval, isn’t it?”

“Nonsense!” Pete exclaimed. “I’m not interested in her at all.”

“All right, let’s leave it at that,” Bob said and smiled. “So let’s go to Mr Moore, a.k.a. Night Hawk!”

“Glad you came,” Roxanne rejoiced when The Three Investigators met up with her in Santa Monica early that evening. Mrs Goldenberg’s mask shop had just closed and the girl was waiting for them by the road.

“Jupiter Jones and Rob Andrews, right?” she asked.

“Bob,” Bob corrected her. “Bob Andrews.”

“Excuse me. I am Roxanne Elfman.” She reached out to them both. “I’m really glad I met you guys. I’ve been reading up on you. Really incredible what you have already experienced. I want to know everything about your cases! How did you manage to catch the perpetrators over and over again?”

“That was mostly thanks to Juve,” Pete confessed.

“In the past, I have only tried to use my mental abilities to the best of my ability,” the First Investigator added without a trace of modesty. “If you want, I’ll tell you more about it. But maybe we’ll first introduce ourselves to Mr Moore and examine this new case.”

“You’re right,” Roxanne said. “He lives in the Santa Monica Mountains in a remote house. I hope I can find my way using his description.”

“You’ve never been there?” Pete wondered. “I thought you knew him.”

“Only from the store,” Roxanne explained. “He collects masks and is a regular customer of Mrs Goldenberg’s. And I know his books, of course. You can’t imagine how excited I was when he came into the shop one day. Night Hawk himself! Of course, I recognized him immediately and asked him about his latest works. He was so nice!”

“Your idol?” Bob went into it. “Does he write anything other than *Demon Zone*?”

“No. Why?”

“Well... I mean... these magazines are not exactly valuable in literary terms,” Bob said.

“They are exciting,” Roxanne countered.

“Perhaps,” Bob said. “If you find incredible stories about ghosts and demons exciting.”

“Mr Moore’s books are much more than just stories,” Roxanne replied angrily. “He is the only author who has realized that the world is full of supernatural powers, if you are only able to feel them.”

Bob raised his eyebrows in surprise. “If you say so.” That’s all he said.

“Let’s just go there. Then we’ll at least see what the burning graves are all about,” suggested Pete, who wanted to avoid an argument. Roxanne unlocked her bicycle, which was leaning against the wall of the house, and together they set off from Santa Monica to the Mountains.

As soon as they had left the hectic traffic of the city behind them, the area became more and more deserted. They went on narrow, little frequented mountain roads, through dense oak forests and past large orange plantations. Jupiter and Roxanne rode slowly, as they excitedly talked about the three detectives' eventful past. Jupiter enjoyed Roxanne's adoration and told as complicated as possible about his most spectacular cases at the expense of their speed.

Eventually they only crept along at walking pace. Pete, who felt excessively under-challenged in his sporting abilities, knew that jostling for Jupiter made no sense. So he rode ahead, only to roll back to the others and cover the distance a second time.

After they had made quite a distance this way, Roxanne directed them to turn left. Here they cycled along a bumpy dirt road, which was apparently used more often by hikers than by cars. The path soon led into a dense forest where hardly a ray of light penetrated.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Pete asked uncertainly.

"That's how Mr Moore described the way," Roxanne said. "He said he lived in a very lonely area. In a moment, we have to go on the right and—"

"Up!" mumbled Jupiter. "Of course. Our creepy author probably lives on top of the highest mountain in the entire Santa Monica Mountains."

In fact, after about a hundred metres, the forest ended and the fading daylight shimmered towards them. When the last trees receded, a wide, grassy hilltop lay before them.

"Oh, my goodness," Pete marvelled and stopped to let the sight of it sink in.

"What's this?" Jupiter next to him muttered, "Looks like it came straight from a nightmare."

3. The Burnt Grave

The house was a massive block that sat enthroned on the hill like a fat fly on a piece of cake. Its walls were deep black and shiny in some places. To the left and right there were two squat turrets, with tiny oriels protruding from the façade everywhere in between.

The house was practically riddled with windows, but it was only at second glance that it was noticed that they were unusually small. This made the house look much bigger than it actually was. But that was not the most striking thing about this building—it was crooked. Like half sunk in mud, it rose diagonally into the sky. In front of the clouds drifting slowly across the sky in the background, it almost looked as if it would sway and fall over at any moment.

“You’re right, Jupe,” Bob confessed. “Like out of a nightmare. If there were lightning and thunder, I would probably flee.”

“This is exactly how I always imagined it would be,” Roxanne said. “Here, you can literally feel the forces from the other world. Now you know what I mean.”

Jupiter and Bob gave each other irritated looks, but decided not to respond to Roxanne’s remark.

Bob turned to Roxanne. “Look how dark the walls are. I wonder if there was a fire.”

But she looked bewildered. “I have no idea. Mr Moore never mentioned a fire.”

“Hey!” Pete suddenly shouted. “Am I seeing right? Is that a cemetery over there?” He pointed to a small number of tombstones and crosses, which stood out to the right of the house as silhouettes against the ever darkening sky.

“Indeed. A house with its own cemetery. Let’s have a look at that. I’m sure we’ll find the tombstone in question.” Jupiter set himself in motion without waiting for the approval of the others.

The closer they came to the house, the more details they could see in the dim light. The towers, oriels and windows were richly decorated and shiny jagged lines ran through the black stone like cracks in a piece of glass.

A beaten path made of black stone slabs led from the house to the tiny cemetery, a collection of about a dozen tombs. There were no paths, no flower beds and no fencing. Almost as expected, none of the tombs stood upright. Due to the absence of even the smallest flower and the chaotic arrangement of the graves, the cemetery made an infinitely bleak impression.

The Three Investigators and Roxanne slowly wandered around the compound, then Bob took a step forward and glanced at the inscription on a tombstone that had the outline of a raven.

“No way!” Bob cried.

“What, Bob?” Pete asked.

“Look who’s buried here!” Bob said.

The other three approached curiously.

“Edgar Allan Poe,” read Pete. “Isn’t he that writer?”

“That writer?” Bob repeated scornfully. “Edgar Allen Poe is one of the greatest American writers of the 19th century!”

“The creator of the modern short story,” Jupe added.

“And best known for his crime stories and horror stories,” Roxanne concluded.

Pete raised his hands defensively. “Excuse me! I didn’t know I’d landed in a literary circle here.”

“As far as I know, Poe died in Baltimore,” said the First Investigator. “This can’t possibly be his grave. I would know, else it would have been a declared tourist destination by now. What does it say on the other headstones?”

“Howard Phillips Lovecraft,” Pete read on the next one. “1890-1937. ‘I am Providence’.”

“Lovecraft was also the author of horror stories,” explained Roxanne. “But he died on the east coast of the US, specifically in Providence.”

“Look! There is a plaque here as well,” Pete remarked. “It says: ‘That is not dead which can eternal lie. And with strange aeons even death may die.’ What’s that supposed to mean? And look, this eerie creature with lots of tentacle arms and a parrot beak carved in the stone.”

“I think that is one of his quotes,” Roxanne said. “And the eerie being is Cthulhu, one of the demonic gods from Lovecraft’s stories.”

“Well, you know a lot about this creepy stuff,” Pete remarked.

“What is this?” Jupiter asked himself. “Why is someone putting up tombstones of people who are actually buried somewhere else?” Involuntarily he raised his right hand to his mouth and began to pinch his lower lip, which he always did when he was thinking hard.

Jupe walked to the next grave, this time it was a cross. “Let’s see, next is Bruce Black. I don’t know him. But he’s only been dead for two years.”

“Hey! This will interest you!” cried Pete, who had gone to a wooden cross. It stood a little aside and looked ancient and deteriorated. But when Bob and Jupiter came closer, they realized that it was burnt. The right side of the crossbar was completely missing, the rest was charred. The name of the deceased was made by individual metal letters nailed on the wood. The letters were scorched. With a little effort they could still decipher them. “Night Hawk!” Pete cried. “This is the Aaron Moore’s alias! I’m sorry, fellas, but I don’t understand it.”

“This is either morbid fun or totally crazy,” said Jupiter. “This Mr Moore seems a very strange man.”

“He is not strange,” Roxanne objected. “He’s—”

“Shh!” hissed Pete. “There’s someone there!”

“What? Where?” Bob asked.

“Over there at the edge of the forest!” Pete whispered. “I just saw a shadow.”

The trees were only about twenty to thirty metres away from the cemetery. Bob and Jupiter strained to look into the breaking darkness, but nothing could be seen.

“You’re starting to see ghosts again,” said Jupiter, shaking his head. “An old house, a dark forest, a cemetery—that’s the spooky cocktail for the Second Investigator.”

“Don’t make fun of me. There really was someone there,” Pete swore. “There! There he is again!”

Now the others saw it too—a black figure broke away from the shadow between the trees and slowly approached them. It was a tall man in a long dark coat. Undecidedly, the four looked at him. When he was just a few metres away, he said, “Good evening, Roxanne. Welcome to Blackstone!”

“Mr Moore!” cried Roxanne happily. “Why did you come out of the woods?”

“I went for a walk. I love these early evening hours and usually use them for a creative break...” Now Aaron Moore stood directly in front of them and the dark shadow became a completely normal person, whose face they could not recognize exactly in the fading light. “So you actually brought your friends.”

Roxanne introduced the three of them and Jupiter took the opportunity to pull one of their business cards out of his pocket. He handed it to Mr Moore. It said:



“So you’re really detectives,” muttered the author. “I did not quite believe Roxanne’s story. Apart from that, I was of the opinion that the matter would certainly clear up on its own. I’m not sure it’s really necessary to put detectives on it.”

“Really?” Jupiter gave Roxanne a doubtful look. “That’s not what I heard.”

“But the three of them have really solved many mysterious cases and has a weakness for unexplained phenomena,” Roxanne quickly said. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to help you.” Imploringly, she turned to The Three Investigators. “Won’t you?”

“Uh... sure,” said Pete, who disliked embarrassing situations.

“If our help is wanted...” Jupiter added.

“All right. How much is your fee?” Mr Moore asked.

“We don’t take money,” explained Jupiter. “Solving a mystery is reward enough for our work. However, you could reveal a secret for us right at the beginning. What is this cemetery all about? This isn’t exactly where Poe and Lovecraft are buried, is it?”

Mr Moore smiled. “No. Although I wouldn’t mind. The only dead person who actually rests there is Bruce Black, the architect who designed Blackstone and also lived in it.”

“Blackstone?” Pete looked into it.

“This house. That’s what it is—Blackstone,” Mr Moore explained. “Black was buried here at his own request. He also laid out this cemetery and built the tombstones.”

“Why?” Pete asked.

“A quirk. He was a great admirer of the old masters of horror literature. Actually these graves are more like monuments. Instead of decorating the garden with statues and rose bushes, he has just created a cemetery. It suited him and Blackstone much better.”

“You knew Mr Black?” Jupiter looked it up.

“Not personally. I just heard and read a lot about him. And through his house, I learned a lot more about him.”

“After he died, you bought it?” Jupiter asked.

Moore barely nodded. “Two years ago.”

“All right.” The First Investigator’s curiosity was satisfied for the time being. “So let us come to the real case—this wooden cross. Why is it here? Roxanne said someone set it on fire. What exactly happened?”

He sighed. “I wish I could answer that question. One thing you can believe me—I didn’t set it up. I may write horror stories, but my humour is not so black that I would build a grave for my alter ego.”

“So someone else set it up.” Jupiter said.

“Yes, last night,” Mr Moore elaborated. “I had just finished the last chapter of the new *Demon Zone* magazine and went around the house to... well, anyway, I went down to the

basement and brought up a bottle of red wine to celebrate. I sat down in the fireplace room, from whose window you can look out over the cemetery.

"Suddenly I saw a flickering in the corner of my eye. I thought it was one of the candles in the room, but then I noticed that the light came from outside. I got up and went to the window. Something was burning brightly in the cemetery. I was terrified. After all, there are only tombstones here, so nothing that could catch fire. I ran outside, armed with a bucket of water, and there was this cross, wrapped in glaring flames. I was able to put the fire out immediately, but you will guess how I felt when I saw the inscription." He pointed to the scorched metal letters.

Pete swallowed involuntarily. "Who could have done this? Did you see anyone?"

Mr Moore shook his head. "No. But the edge of the forest is just up ahead. So it's quite possible that someone was hiding behind the trees last night without me noticing him."

"What did you do after the fire was put out?" Jupiter wanted to know.

He laughed nervously. "I crept around the house once to look for the culprit, then I locked myself in and didn't sleep a wink all night."

"When was that?" Jupiter asked.

"At about three o'clock. I often work at night."

"Did anything else happen after that?"

"No. After a while, I fell asleep."

"Did you find any tracks?"

"No."

"Why didn't you call the police?"

Again, Mr Moore laughed briefly. "This is a real interrogation. Very professional, I must say. But we can talk better inside, don't you think? Unless a dark cemetery is just the place for you to discuss such an incident."

"Well, not for me," Pete said quickly. He was grateful for a change of location and turned his attention to the house. But then a shiver involuntarily went through his mind when he thought of entering Blackstone. As they walked towards it, he looked closely at the black walls—and stood still, irritated. "It's not crooked at all!"

"What?" asked Jupiter.

"The house. All this time I thought it was crooked," Pete remarked.

"It does... It doesn't!" Bob said. "You're right, Pete, the outside walls are perfectly straight."

"Fascinating effect, isn't it?" laughed the writer. "Bruce Black was a master of his trade. He has designed the windows, towers and bay windows so that they are all slightly sloping. This gives the impression that the whole house is leaning to the side. That's not so. In fact, the walls are straight as a die."

"Impressive," Roxanne thought. "All of Blackstone is impressive!"

"Wait till you see the inside," Moore announced with a mysterious smile. They reached the wide stairs leading to a heavy oak door. Even the steps were crooked, but that too seemed to have been the intention of the builder.

"Not for old people," remarked Pete, who immediately had the feeling of falling at any moment because of the different step heights. Above the door, carved into the stone, was a gargoyle—a mythical creature that looked down on them in darkness. There was also a miniature version on the iron ring of the door knocker.

While The Three Investigators and Roxanne were still fascinated by the elaborate doorway, a small fire suddenly flared up behind them. Mr Moore lit small candles with a lighter and placed them in hollowed-out pumpkin heads with demonic faces carved into them.

The pumpkins that adorned the stone banister were earlier not noticeable in the dark, but now they illuminated the sloping staircase in flickering orange.

“My homemade Halloween decorations,” explained Mr Moore, smiling sheepishly. “I know Halloween isn’t for two days, but you can’t start driving away the evil spirits soon enough.”

“Especially not after a night like last night,” Pete agreed with him, who had an understanding for Mr Moore’s beliefs. At the same time, however, he was unsure whether he should feel more comfortable in view of the grinning pumpkin heads.

Mr Moore walked past them and opened the door. “Come in! Blackstone welcomes you!”

Pete had expected an eerie entrance and he was not disappointed. Right behind the door, five more steps led up, followed by a long corridor. Even this corridor looked crooked, as if it led from the door into the house at a slight angle. It was almost dark.

“Where is the light switch here?” Pete asked hesitantly after he had stumbled over the first step of the stairs.

“Oh, there isn’t one,” Mr Moore said. “Or rather, there are no lamps.”

“You don’t have electricity?” Bob wondered.

“Yes, but I prefer natural light.” With these words Moore lit some candles, which were placed in candlesticks on the wall. Flickeringly they illuminated the narrow corridor, but at the same time made the shadows appear deeper and more threatening.

The corridor was decorated with tapestries and on the floor were heavy runners that swallowed every sound. Next to a door was an old knight’s armour. On the opposite, a black coffin was leaning against the wall. Pete swallowed a comment and passed the coffin without letting it out of his sight.

Suddenly the lid snapped open. Something white reached for the Second Investigator—the bony hand of a skeleton!

4. The Secrets of Blackstone

Pete screamed in horror and jumped to the side. Something cold touched his other shoulder, a moment later something crashed to the ground. But the Second Investigator only had eyes for the pale skeleton that swayed back and forth with a grin and swung a scythe as if it was about to strike at any moment.

Jupiter, Bob and Roxanne, who walked behind Pete, were also stiff with fright. A quiet, eerie laugh made them pull together.

“May I introduce—Bruce, my ghost. One of the good kind,” giggled Mr Moore.

“W... what?” Pete stammered.

Mr Moore was obviously having the time of his life, amused by the puzzled faces of his guests. Then Jupiter understood and he laughed too. “The skeleton is hung on strings! You must have triggered a hidden mechanism, Pete, which caused the Grim Reaper to jump out of the coffin.”

“Right, Jupiter. A trigger mechanism hidden under the carpet. Pete stepped on it. I always forget to warn my visitors.” Mr Moore’s grin suggested that he hadn’t forgotten at all. “The trick was installed by Bruce Black himself, so I named the skeleton after him. He probably got the idea from one of his beloved horror novels.”

Now even Pete dared to laugh timidly. “My heart almost stopped. I’m sorry I knocked the armour over.”

“He’s used to it,” assured Mr Moore, and together they brought the old knight back standing.

“This is a real haunted house,” Bob said. “Are there any more surprises like that?”

“Wait and see,” replied Mr Moore and continued his way through the dusky corridor.

He led them into a large room at the back of the house. Here too it was completely dark until he had lit a dozen candles in a chandelier and pulled them under the ceiling with the help of a rope device. Now there was a dim light. Jupiter noticed that they hadn’t really seen Mr Moore’s face closely yet. It was always half in the shade.

The room was sparsely furnished. In the middle was a tea table, a red baroque sofa and two red armchairs. There was a fireplace, but the rest of the room was empty—apart from the wall decoration.

Masks grinned at them from all four walls. Pete was immediately reminded of Mrs Goldenberg’s shop, only it lacked the movie monsters.

The masks came from different countries all over the world, most of them were carved from wood, but there were also some made from clay and even from metal. They looked very old and valuable. The variety of sometimes friendly, sometimes angry looking faces was confusing. It was not possible to concentrate on one of the pieces, because the gaze was immediately distracted by another mask.

“My humble collection,” announced Mr Moore, offering his guests a seat. “These walls are crying out for a new face. Every couple of weeks, I go down to Santa Monica to look for a new mask at Mrs Goldenberg’s.”

Pete recognized the Kolam mask that Roxanne had shown him.

“Since you’re talking about the walls,” Jupiter started and pinching his lower lip. “Am I wrong—or is this room not straight either?”

“Not a single room in Blackstone is. Bruce Black designed it so that the walls never form a right angle. He wanted to create the eerie impression that the house makes on the outside, also on the inside. The lack of right angles has the interesting effect that it is very difficult to find your way around the rooms. For example, if you go through the library and from there to the guest room, you think you are entering the corridor through the third door. In fact, you end up in the bathroom. It has confused many people—including me when I first moved in.”

“Fascinating,” said Jupiter.

“Blackstone really is a very special place,” Roxanne thought. “Now I know where you get your ideas for your creepy books.”

“Yes, the dark forces are strongly felt here,” Moore replied imploringly, then cleared his throat and looked around embarrassed. “I like the atmosphere of the house. It inspires me.”

“Do you think the burning cross has something to do with your work?” Jupiter returned to the reason for their visit.

“What do you mean?” Moore asked, coughing suddenly.

“Roxanne suggested that a fan of your stories might be behind it,” Jupiter said.

“So?” Moore looked at the girl questioningly.

“Well, you read this kind of stuff all the time—that famous people are hounded by their fans, who then go crazy and threaten their idols.” Quickly she added: “I would never do such a thing, of course!”

“Do you think there’s anything to this, Mr Moore?” Jupiter asked.

“I don’t know. I get a lot of mail, of course. And there are not always pleasant things in the letters.”

“What does that mean?” Bob wanted to know. “Were there any threatening letters?”

“Not real threatening letters, no. Rather harmless stuff that I didn’t take seriously. Sometimes people feel particularly funny when you write something to the author of horror stories like ‘May your soul burn eternally in hell fire’. Mostly they belong to some obscure religious associations. Or they quote me and replace the names of the people I agonizingly kill in my stories with mine. But that’s rather the exception and I don’t really feel threatened by it.”

“Have you received letters like that recently?” Jupiter asked.

“I get them every now and then, but lately? No.”

“Do you have any suspicion who might have done this to the cross? Or for what purpose it was burned?”

Mr Moore shook his head. “I suppose it was to scare me.” He laughed nervously. “Well, it worked. But I’m afraid I can’t give you a clue. Maybe you shouldn’t put so much emphasis on it. It never occurred to me to hire detectives for this. It was Roxanne’s idea.”

“Well,” Roxanne began reluctantly. “I found the idea of working with you and the famous Three Investigators so exciting.”

“Well,” sighed Mr Moore. “But there is probably no case here at all. It was a harmless prank, nothing more. Of course I’d like to know who the culprit was. But he probably won’t strike twice.”

The First Investigator remained sceptical. “A bit too much effort for a harmless prank, don’t you think? After all, someone even put your name—or rather your pseudonym—with metal letters onto the cross. No, I think there’s more to it than that. Maybe not necessarily a psychopathic fan, but one with a deeper intention.”

“Do you think? I have the impression that you see even more ghosts than I do,” laughed Mr Moore. Then he looked at his watch.

“I’m sorry, you four, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Outside it is dark and now my creative time begins. I’ve only just finished one story, but the next one is waiting for me.” Mr Moore stood up.

“How many of these *Demon Zone* books do you write?” Pete enquired.

“One every three weeks. So I have to get back to work immediately. If you think of anything that might help me find out who did this, let me know.”

“All right. And you’ll contact us if something uncanny should happen again,” Jupiter suggested.

Mr Moore accompanied them to the exit. This time they took care not to touch the strip that was barely visible under the carpet. They said goodbye to the author at the door and went to their bicycles.

After Mr Moore disappeared in the house, Bob whispered to Roxanne: “You’ve given us a great case.”

“What do you mean?” Roxanne asked.

“Mr Moore is quite nice, but it was more than obvious he was only telling us about the burning cross out of courtesy,” Bob said.

“That’s right,” Jupiter agreed with his friend. “And he even invited us into the house to show us his mask collection. He didn’t want us investigating the case from the start.”

“So what?” Roxanne said. “It’s not my fault he was suddenly so dismissive.”

“Nothing at all,” Bob admitted. “But you claimed that he wanted use our services. I feel really stupid. We’ve really pushed our way in.”

“Maybe he will change his mind,” Roxanne hoped.

“Why should he?” Bob said. “No, for me it was a definite turn-off. We have no business here anymore. And Moore is probably even right—the issue with the cross was nothing more than a prank. A bit drastic, but ultimately harmless.”

“So that’s it?” Roxanne asked and sparkled angrily at him, “You give up that easily? I expected more from the famous Three Investigators.”

“I agree with Bob,” said Jupe. “If our help isn’t wanted, we won’t do it.”

They pushed their bikes to the edge of the forest. In the darkness it was too dangerous to cycle on the forest road, so they decided to push the bikes to the road. There was an angry silence.

“Then I am your client,” Roxanne began the discussion again. “I—”

Suddenly, they heard a deafening bang, followed by glass shattering. It made them collapse. Then came another bang. They turned around. It banged again and again and again. Over on Blackstone the windows shattered in short flashes of light. The window panes shining in the pale moonlight exploded one after the other as if they were in a chain reaction and hurled shards of glass into the night.

5. The Glass Shard

Between the explosions, they could hear Mr Moore's screams. Unable to move, the four of them stared with open mouths at the continuous bursting of window panes.

Bob was the first to move. "Come on, we gotta go back!" He threw his bike into the grass and ran the fifty metres up to the house. Just as he reached the entrance, the explosions stopped. The last shards rained down on the grass, then it was dead silent.

"Mr Moore!" cried Bob and banged on the door. "Mr Moore!"

"Maybe something happened to him," Pete thought feverishly, who had appeared next to Bob. "How are we gonna get in the house?"

"Well, through here," muttered Jupiter and set about climbing through one of the crooked broken windows. However, his fullness of body prevented him from pulling himself up on the wooden frame.

The Second Investigator pushed him aside, took momentum and pulled himself up in a long, powerful movement. A moment later, he had already disappeared into the house.

Pete jumped into a dark room. Only the faint moonlight that fell in gave him a hint of some outlines.

The Second Investigator spotted a door and stepped outside. But he did not find himself in the corridor, as expected, but in a guest room. Confused, he looked around. There were two other doors. But he'd probably use the right one to get into the hall... But it led to the bathroom. Mr Moore was right. In this house you could get lost faster than in a hall of mirrors.

Now Pete randomly tried one door after the other and stumbled through several dark rooms until by pure coincidence he landed in the corridor. He quickly rushed to the front door—and stepped on the trigger mechanism under the carpet. Bruce fell out of his coffin and swung the scythe. Pete was frightened a second time, though not as violently as the first, then he angrily stuffed the skeleton back into his dwelling and opened the front door.

"That took a long time!" said Jupiter impatiently and rushed past Pete into the house.

"I got lost," Pete admitted. "You can't find your way around here."

"Where is Mr Moore?" Jupiter asked.

"I don't know," Pete replied. "Watch out, Juve, the—"

Too late! Jupiter stepped on the trigger mechanism. This time they just let Bruce dangle in the corridor and set off in search of Mr Moore.

They found him in the mask room, where he stood motionless in the middle of the room, staring at the destroyed window pane. He flinched when the three detectives appeared behind him.

"Mr Moore! Did something happen to you? My goodness, you're bleeding!" Pete looked horrified at the dark red stains on Moore's white shirt. "Hurry, the wound must be dressed!"

But Moore fought off Pete's helping hand. "That's red wine," he said monotonously, pointing to the broken glass at his feet. "Did you see that?"

"Yes. We were almost in the forest when we heard the bangs," Jupiter summarized. "How did this happen? Were... was that you?"

“Me?” Mr Moore stared at Jupiter in horror, then turned around abruptly and left the room with quick steps. He ran into the corridor and ripped open the nearest door. Room after room he checked the windows, only to find that they were all destroyed. The Three Investigators could hardly follow him, as there was no light anywhere.

“I’ll light the candles,” said Jupiter, took a lighter from his pocket and tried to light the candles in the corridor. But it was to no avail as there was a draught through the broken windows throughout the house and the flame was immediately blown out. So they stumbled up to Mr Moore and tried to calm him down.

“Wait a minute!” cried Jupiter. “Please tell us exactly what happened.”

“You saw that!” cried Mr Moore, furious. “The storm broke the windows.”

“The storm?” Pete asked in surprise. “Outside there’s no storm at all, not even a strong wind!”

“Then it was something else.” He continued his hectic wanderings through the house.

“So you saw nothing?” Jupiter kept trying.

“No!”

“We’ll check the windows immediately,” Jupiter suggested. “Provided you may have a flashlight for—”

“No! You’re not investigating anything!” Mr Moore cried. “Get out of here!”

The Three Investigators looked at each other confused.

“Excuse me?” Jupiter asked, puzzled.

“You heard me right. Get out of here!”

“But... but someone has just made an attack on you and your house,” cried Jupiter. “We need to check for tracks immediately, if there are any.”

“You don’t have to!”

“But we can’t—”

“Out!” Mr Moore yelled so loud that there was no doubt about how serious he was. He shoved The Three Investigators into the corridor and from there to the front door.

“You should call the police immediately,” cried Bob as he stepped out of the house.

“Yes, yes! Get out of here!” Mr Moore slammed the heavy oak door closed behind them.

“My goodness! He’s really hysterical,” Pete remarked. “We’d better not leave him alone.”

“Then what?” Bob asked. “Right now it looks like he might even call the police to get rid of us.”

“By the way, where is Roxanne?” Jupiter suddenly asked. “She didn’t follow us into the house, did she?”

“You’re right,” said Pete, who had not noticed Roxanne’s absence. “She didn’t come with us, unless I am wrong.”

“There she is! Over there!” Bob pointed to the edge of the forest.

There, Roxanne waited impatiently by the bicycles. “There you are at last! What happened?”

“Mr Moore kicked us out,” Pete replied. “Why didn’t you come with us?”

She stared at him in horror. “Do you think I’ll ever set foot in that house again? After all the windows just exploded?”

“Someone is continuing his evil pranks,” Jupiter suggested.

“You seem very sure of yourself,” Roxanne replied reluctantly. “What do you think just happened?” Roxanne glanced indecisively at the three detectives.

“Blackstone is no ordinary house,” Jupiter said.

“Certainly not,” Roxanne said. “It’s a kind of energy centre. You can feel it as soon as you step on it.”

“A what?” Pete asked.

“A gateway between this world and the other world, the spirit world,” Roxanne explained.

The Three Investigators looked at her in disbelief, but Roxanne continued unmoved: “Halloween is approaching—the night when the wall between the worlds disappears. It is already very thin. I guarantee you this window incident won’t be the last. In two days, something terrible will happen.”

“So let’s summarize,” said Jupiter, when they met again late in the evening at Headquarters. They had accompanied Roxanne home before going back to Rocky Beach. “We have a burnt grave cross, a very unusual house, exploded window panes, a young mask saleswoman with a clear penchant for the supernatural and for an author of cheap horror books—and the author himself, who is quite opaque and prone to hysterical outbursts.”

“That’s a lot,” Pete said. “Those explosions gave me a hell of a fright. I can understand Roxanne wanting nothing more to do with the house. I don’t want to either.” He looked uncertainly from Jupe to Bob. “But knowing you, I probably don’t have a choice, do I?”

“This is where the real excitement begins,” said the First Investigator. “What do you think of Moore?”

“I don’t know,” Bob muttered. “He seemed nice enough at first. But later he started acting strange—when he lighted the pumpkin heads, for example. He made it sound as if he was joking about driving away evil spirits, but I got the impression he was serious.”

Pete nodded. “Right. And him kicking us out wasn’t normal either. I bet he didn’t call the police. There’s something wrong with this guy. Then again, no wonder, if I lived in a house like this, I’d start to go crazy, too.”

“The question is what causes what,” pondered Jupiter. “Is Moore so strange because he lives in Blackstone, or does he live in Blackstone because he is so strange? And what does the mysterious stranger want from him? Is he just bullying him, or is there more to it?”

Pete cleared his throat and hesitantly asked, “So you don’t think that... well, you mean there’s a human being behind this?”

“Do you believe Roxanne’s ghost story?” Bob replied for Jupiter. “The night when the wall between the worlds gets thin? She is crazy with her Halloween stuff. I don’t mind if she stays away from Blackstone in the future. At least then we can investigate undisturbed.”

“So that means we’re going ahead,” the Second Investigator resignedly noted.

“Of course,” the other two answered as if from one mouth.

“And how?” Pete asked, puzzled.

“Tomorrow, in daylight, we’ll take another closer look around the grounds,” Jupe suggested.

“What if Moore drives us out of there again?” Pete asked.

“I think he’ll calm down by tomorrow,” Jupiter replied. “We can also offer him to look after the house if he has to go to town. After all, without windows, it invites burglars. Apart from that, we should urgently supply ourselves with information.”

“What kind of information?” Pete enquired, perplexed.

“About Moore. About Blackstone. Everything we can find out,” Jupe said. “Bob and Pete, that will be your assignment tomorrow right after school. Go to the library to find out about our horror writer and the man who built his crazy house.”

“And what are you going to do?” Pete wanted to know. “Are you playing ‘Hunt II’?”

“Not at all. I have other plans.” Jupiter remained silent, smiling.

Bob and Pete knew there was no point in continuing. If Jupiter put on that smile, he would only tell them his plans or findings when he thought it was right, and not a second earlier.

“All right. I’m gonna go home now. It’s been a long day, I’ve had enough for today,” sighed Bob.

When they had left, Jupiter reached into the inside pocket of his jacket, which he had hung over the chair. He pulled out a small object that was wrapped in a handkerchief. With this, he went next door to the laboratory they had set up at Headquarters. Here, The Three Investigators had gathered the necessary equipment to examine and investigate traces closely.

The First Investigator sat down at the desk and carefully unfolded the handkerchief. In front of him was a shard of glass. He had put it in unnoticed before he followed Bob into the house.

Jupiter did not believe a gust of wind had blown up all the windows one after the other, nor in ghosts from another world. He believed in something quite different. Carefully he placed the shard under the microscope.

Instead of cycling straight home from school, Jupiter made a detour to the Rocky Beach Police Department the next day. He wanted to see Inspector Cotta. They had worked with him many times before and when he had time, he did not mind doing the three detectives a favour—but not without spicing it up with a volley of sarcastic remarks.

“Good afternoon, Inspector,” Jupiter said.

“Jupiter Jones,” Cotta noted and immediately immersed himself in his desk work again when the First Investigator entered his office. “Who should I arrest today?”

“No one yet,” Jupiter replied with a grin. “I hate to interrupt, but—”

“But you do it again and again,” Cotta remarked. “What is it now?”

“I only have one tiny request.” Jupiter put a small plastic bag on the desk. “This is a sample that I took from a window pane that... well, broke.”

“So? Do you want to know if it was the neighbourhood boy’s ball or the cobblestone of a street gang that smashed the window?”

“I’d like you to have the sample tested for me in the police lab,” Jupiter said.

Now Inspector Cotta looked up and raised an eyebrow sceptically. “You three can find a secret even behind a broken window pane, huh?” He took the bag with the glass shards in his hand and waved it around indecisively. “All right, I’ll forward it and call you as soon as I get results.”

Jupiter smiled happily. “Thank you, sir.”

Cotta shook his head and muttered. “I’m just too good-natured. Now get lost, I’m busy.”

“I’m outta here.” The First Investigator left the office and headed home.

Right after lunch he went to Headquarters to wait for Bob and Pete. The answering machine was flashing, Jupe rewound the tape and listened to the message.

“Hi, this is Roxanne. Did you sleep well last night? Then you will be wide awake when I tell you the latest news... No, wait, I’m not telling you, you have to find out for yourself. Read Aaron Moore’s new *Demon Zone* book! It was released today, a special Halloween edition entitled *The Fire Demon*. I just devoured it in one sitting. You won’t believe it when you read what’s in there! Call me! *Ciao!*”

Ten seconds later, Jupiter had left Headquarters and was on his way to the newsstand.

6. The Four Elements

When Bob and Pete entered Headquarters, Jupiter was reading the last lines of *The Fire Demon*.

“Aha,” growled Pete. “So this is what you had to do so urgently. Read.”

Wordlessly Jupiter held up the magazine.

“*Demon Zone*?” Pete asked. “Do you think it’ll help if we know what Aaron Moore does for a living?”

“And whether that will get us anywhere,” replied Juve mysteriously and was about to tell what he had learned when Bob beat him to it.

“Let’s report first,” Bob said. “Because we found out a lot. But that doesn’t necessarily make the case more transparent. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Pete nodded. “If you think Blackstone is already mysterious and creepy, listen to what we’ve found out about its designer.”

“Bruce Black was a moderately successful architect,” Bob reported. “This was mainly because his designs were too extravagant for most customers. He once designed houses for Hollywood stars here and there, a museum in Philadelphia and two or three other public buildings. That was it. Nevertheless, at some point he had earned so much money that he could afford to build his own house.”

“Blackstone?” Jupiter surmised.

“Right,” Bob continued. “Blackstone is not just a Bruce Black building. It was his dream house—or rather his nightmare house. In an interview I found in a book on modern architecture, Black said the house appeared to him in a dream. He woke up the next morning and immediately sensed that this would be his life’s work. The house he had always waited for. After that dream, he immediately drew the plans, but then took months searching for the right building site.”

“Well, cheap building land is not easy to find in and around Los Angeles,” said Jupiter.

“That was not the point,” Pete interjected. “Now comes the real kicker to the story. Black searched for so long because he wanted to find a place where he could be close to spirits and demons.”

“Excuse me?” Jupiter asked.

“A place where some energy fields and lines of force come together, where there are cosmic influences, where the real and the other world meet,” Pete said.

Jupiter frowned. “That was what Roxanne said. Highly unbelievable.”

Bob nodded. “Indeed. Black probably took forever to find a place that met his expectations. Blackstone was to become a kind of hub for magical powers. This probably also explains the mystical exterior and interior of the house. Isn’t that wild?”

“But... what’s the point of all this?” Jupiter asked. “I’m not quite sure about that. Why does someone need a house where the supernatural powers supposedly go in and out?”

Bob shrugged his shoulders. “Black believed in this ghost stuff. The construction of Blackstone took exactly one year. The foundation stone was laid on 31 October—on Halloween. And that same day, a year later, the house was finished.”

"Someone took it very seriously," Jupe said. "If Bruce Black is to be believed, his house is a playground for ghosts. I would be interested to know if Moore knows the whole story and therefore bought the house. After all, he writes scary stories. And whether our unknown perpetrator makes use of this mystical background to stage his spook. What did you find out about Moore?"

"Not much," Pete said disappointedly. "We found a lot, of course, but mainly interviews where he was asked about *Demon Zone*. He only said trivial stuff, such as how he came to write the series, its success, where he got his ideas from and so on. Nothing important."

"The only interesting thing is that in the beginning, *Demon Zone* was quite unsuccessful. From issue to issue, people were considering whether the series should be discontinued," Bob added. "But then there was a turnaround. The magazines had huge sales, circulation soared and *Demon Zone* became one of the most successful series of magazines in America. Guess when that happened? Pretty much two years ago, around the time Moore moved into Blackstone."

"Maybe there is some truth in the ghost stories after all," Pete pondered.

"It is more likely that his stories just got better because he talked himself into taking his inspiration from supernatural powers. This is called auto-suggestion. He imagines that he is possessed by ghosts and suddenly behave accordingly, even though there is no ghost around... But now I want to tell you about my discovery," Jupiter proudly announced. "I, too, have continued to follow up after Roxanne suggested reading this." He waved the *Demon Zone* magazine, then played the recording on the answering machine.

"Uh-huh," Pete said with interest after hearing Roxanne's agitated voice. "So, what's so incredible about this magazine?"

"The story is about an author of a series of stories whose physical description pretty much matches Aaron Moore's own appearance," Jupiter said.

"No kidding," Pete said. "I guess he wanted to write a story about himself."

"Sort of. Only that the author in his story does not write horror books, but books for young people. But I guess that's secondary. In any case, this man is threatened by uncanny forces, to be precise, by a Fire Demon who wants to kill him. The emergence of this demon is heralded by four threatening incidents, each related to one of the four elements—fire, air, earth and water. After the appearance of these four elements, a mysterious mask emerges, a last harbinger, so to speak, through which the Fire Demon himself finally materializes—on Halloween night, of course."

"Sure," Pete thought. "It's a Halloween special."

"Exactly," Jupe said.

"And what is so spectacular about that?" Pete asked.

"It was how the four elements appeared. The first element was fire. In the story, a burning cross appeared."

"Excuse me?" cried Bob and Pete at the same time.

"You heard me," Jupiter affirmed.

"And the second?"

"The second element was air," Jupiter continued. "All of a sudden, a storm came up and it was so violent that all the windows in the author's house shattered."

The Second Investigator gasped for breath. "This is incredible!"

"Isn't it?" Jupe said.

"How does the story end?"

"With the death of the main character."

"My goodness," Pete exclaimed.

“Phew!” moaned Bob. “Somebody is playing a very bad game with Mr Moore. That does look like the work of a mentally-disturbed fan.”

“Or for a jealous man who doesn’t want Moore to succeed,” Jupiter wondered. “But it explains why Moore was talking about storms yesterday. He understood immediately what these two incidents meant. The question is, why didn’t he tell us?”

“I don’t know. But one thing is very clear. This is no longer a coincidence,” Pete concluded. “Someone must have read the story and is now using it as a template. But wait a minute, didn’t Roxanne say that the magazine just came out today?”

“That’s exactly what puzzled me. She must be mistaken. I’ll call his publisher, Fluky House in New York, to check it out. I have the following assumption—the magazine is available earlier on the East Coast and arrives in Los Angeles with a few days or even weeks delay. That would explain a lot.”

Jupiter checked the number of the publisher on the Internet. Then he switched on the loudspeaker connected to the phone and dialled the number. It took a while before he had someone on the phone who could answer his question.

“The new issue of *Demon Zone*,” the voice drifted out of the loudspeaker.

“Right.”

“*The Fire Demon*?”

“Right.”

“This just came out today.”

“Everywhere?”

“What do you mean, everywhere?”

“I mean, all over America? I’m calling from California. Wouldn’t it hit the market earlier in New York?”

“Well, where would we be if we didn’t publish our titles everywhere at the same time? No, no, today is the release date all over the US.”

“Isn’t there such a thing as a pre-release? For advertising purposes or for book reviews?” Jupiter followed up.

The man on the other end laughed. “Not for a *Demon Zone* magazine. These things disappear from the market as fast as they appear. A pre-release would not be worthwhile at all.”

“So there’s not the slightest chance of reading the magazine before it officially comes out?”

“You are persistent. No, there isn’t. Not the slightest.”

“All right. Thank you very much for the information.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jupiter hung up and immediately his free hand moved to his lower lip.

“That’s something,” Pete thought. “But how is that possible? Somebody must have read the story! How else—”

He was interrupted by the ringing of the phone. Jupiter picked up the phone.

“Hi, this is Roxanne. Did you read the book?”

“The magazine? Yes, I did. We are currently discussing how it is possible for someone to use a story as a template for attacks that occur before the story has even appeared.”

“So you still believe that a human being is behind all this?” Roxanne asked half disappointed, half doubting.

“And you still believe in supernatural powers?” Jupiter asked.

“There’s no other way to explain the story. Do you?” Roxanne said.

“Not yet.”

"I'm telling you, something is not right in this house! My theory is that Blackstone himself fed Mr Moore this story."

"The house?"

"The soul of the house, the spirit of the house, call it what you will. It anticipated events and led Mr Moore to write this book. And now exactly what he wrote down is coming true," Roxanne explained.

Jupiter pondered for a moment whether he should tell Roxanne about the reports about Bruce Black and his haunted house. But then he decided against it. That would only add fuel to the fire unnecessarily.

"I consider this rather unlikely due to a lack of empirical data and logic," he replied diplomatically.

"Excuse me?"

"I cannot accept your views on this, because in my experience there are no such things," the First Investigator tried again.

"All right," she muttered. "You'll see. What are you gonna do now?"

"We will pay Mr Moore another visit," Jupiter said. "If the story continues as in *The Fire Demon*, then tonight there will be the third element—earth. But this time we'll catch the culprit and end the haunting early."

7. Search for Traces

“What’s the next element going to be?” Pete wanted to know when they rode their bikes through the mountains half an hour later.

They had considered calling Mr Moore, but decided against it. It would be harder for him to get rid of them if they were at his door. Besides, he couldn’t evade their questions so easily.

“The element of earth. It went like this—the night after the storm, the author’s house was attacked by snakes and spiders,” replied Jupiter.

Pete suddenly braked. “What?”

The First Investigator and Bob wanted to go on, but since Pete didn’t make any effort to move again, they stopped as well. “Snakes and spiders come out of the forest and attack the house,” repeated Jupiter.

Pete gasped for breath. “You don’t really think I’m going there now, do you?”

“Why not?” Jupiter asked.

“What if we are attacked by snakes?”

“Calm down, Pete,” Bob tried. “Just because it’s in the new *Demon Zone* magazine doesn’t mean it’s gonna happen to Mr Moore.”

“And what about the cross? And the windows?” Pete asked. “That’s what happened, just like the story said.”

“Making a cross, putting it in the cemetery and lighting it is one thing,” Jupe said. “But I would be very surprised if the culprit succeeded in luring heaps of spiders and snakes from the forest to the house.”

“Yesterday, you would probably have said the same in the case of the windows before it happened,” Pete contradicted. “The perpetrator managed to make it look exactly like in *The Fire Demon* and we haven’t the faintest idea how he did it.”

“That’s not quite true,” said Jupiter and smiled knowingly. “Because yesterday I took one of the broken pieces of glass and examined it last night.”

Bob raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Uh-huh. You didn’t say anything about that.”

“Should also be a surprise. But it seems to me that in this case it is appropriate not to withhold any information from our Second Investigator, so that he can get back on his bike and continue his journey with confidence.”

“I’m curious to see what reassuring things you can come up with,” Pete doubted.

“I found traces of soot on the glass,” Jupiter said.

“So what?” Pete asked.

“This indicates that the windows were destroyed by some kind of explosive device and not by a magical gust of wind. Today I brought a sample of the shards to Inspector Cotta, who will have it analyzed for us in the police laboratory. We’ll probably get the results tomorrow and know more then. Conclusion—no need to panic. We’re not dealing with supernatural beings.”

“Whether ghosts or men, I am still not reassured,” Pete said. “When I think that I could be bitten by a rattlesnake at any moment...”

“We’re going to Mr Moore’s to prevent someone from getting bitten,” Jupiter reminded him. “Besides, it’s time to get some answers. Because I can’t shake the feeling that he’s hiding a lot from us.”

“He can do that,” Pete murmured. “After all, we don’t work for him.”

The First Investigator ignored the objection, and started pedalling his bike and rode on.

“Come on, Pete,” Bob tried to persuade him. “Nothing bad will happen.”

“Your word in the ears of all spirits and demons,” Pete sighed, but then pedalled reluctantly.

When they reached the grassy hilltop, the sun was just above the tops of the trees. But the daylight was sufficient to take a closer look at the house and the cemetery. Even by day, Blackstone seemed like a foreign object in that landscape. Its deep black walls swallowed the sunlight almost completely, only here and there the rock shone as if after a downpour.

They saw Mr Moore from a distance, he was standing by one of the broken windows on the upper floor and covered it from the inside with a plastic sheet. When he noticed the three detectives, he hesitated. For a moment it looked as if he was angrily trying to chase them off his property. But then he disappeared and appeared in the door a short time later.

“Good afternoon, Mr Moore,” Jupiter greeted him as friendly as possible. “We don’t want to bother you. But we would like to take the opportunity to look at the cemetery and the windows while there is still daylight. I hope you don’t mind.”

“You won’t find anything,” murmured Mr Moore, then said louder, “Okay. Look around. It can’t hurt. Excuse me, but I have to cover the windows before it gets dark. It will take the glazier a few days to measure and cut everything to size. That’s the drawback to slanting windows.” He smiled sheepishly and then disappeared back into the house without another word.

“Well, he’s pretty short-tempered today,” Pete remarked.

They walked over to the cemetery, with the Second Investigator carefully searching the grass for snakes and spiders. The cross still stood there exactly as it had been the day before. Mr Moore obviously hadn’t touched it.

“What exactly are we looking for, Juve?” Bob wanted to know.

“Tracks. Any kind of tracks. Check the grass. Maybe you’ll find something,” Juve said.

“In any case, we can forget about fingerprints,” Bob said. “On the metal letters they might have been easy to see, but look at the letters—no imprint survived the fire.”

While Bob and Pete first aimlessly and then systematically tapped the ground, Jupiter took a closer look at the cross. Bob was right. He wouldn’t find prints here. But there was no danger of destroying a trace. He pulled out his pocket knife and set about removing one of the letters from the cross. It was nailed to the wood through a small hole in the middle. Finally he had the ‘A’ of ‘Hawk’ in his hand, which had been least damaged by the fire. Undecidedly, he turned it back and forth. There was something engraved on the back, a tiny stamp, almost completely deformed by the heat.

“I’ve got something!” announced Pete, who was sliding around on the floor four metres away. Triumphant he held a tiny object in the air.

“A match!” cried Bob with fake enthusiasm. “This is the trail! Hey, the case is as good as solved.”

“Very funny!” Pete quipped.

“I have found something too,” Jupiter said. “Look, there’s an engraving on the back of the letters: ‘Miller & Co, N.Y.’”

“Uh-huh. And what does that mean?” Pete asked.

“That means the same thing as your match, Pete,” Jupe said. “No demon from this or any other world needs a match to light a cross. Nor would he buy his metal letters from Miller & Co. in New York either.”

“New York!” Bob said, really excited this time. “Doesn’t that mean anything to us?”

“What?” Pete asked.

“Fluky House,” Jupiter said. “The publisher that publishes *Demon Zone*. It’s also in New York.”

“You think someone from the publisher might be behind this?” Pete asked.

“It’s possible. That would explain why someone knows *The Fire Demon* story even though the magazine hasn’t appeared yet.” Bob smiled proudly.

“Could be,” Jupiter admitted. “But we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Let’s see what Mr Moore has to say about this theory.”

They continued to search for traces, but gave up after some time.

“There’s nothing more to be found here,” Bob said. “We’d better take care of the windows.”

Aaron Moore continued to lie low when The Three Investigators asked him for permission to examine the broken window panes.

“All right. Then you might as well help me seal it.” He handed them some plastic sheets and duct tape and disappeared into an adjacent room to continue working.

Each window that the three of them sealed, they examined carefully beforehand. But to their disappointment, they discovered nothing that would have given them a clue as to the cause of the explosions. Mr Moore had already removed all the broken pieces, so all they had left were the empty frames. They were flawless except for a few minor burn marks.

In this way, however, they got to know the rest of Blackstone. Each room had its own dark aura. Masks could be found everywhere, although not as numerous as in the mask room. In addition, there were dark oil paintings, tapestries with mystical motifs and small sculptures depicting bizarre creatures with two heads, overgrown goblins or grinning demons. Everywhere they felt being watched by staring eyes and soon were uncomfortable under their gaze. Blackstone was a museum of the occult. This impression was reinforced by the lack of furniture.

Only the study, the bedroom, the kitchen and the bathroom looked inhabited. All other rooms were cold and lifeless as if they were waiting for the evil powers for which they were set up for.

“I can’t find my way around here at all,” Pete moaned. “These crooked rooms are driving me crazy. It makes my head spin. It’s like wearing glasses that distort everything. At night, you would have nightmares here. That Bruce Black must have been really crazy. Who builds a house that’s uninhabitable?”

“Aaron Moore wants to live here,” Bob remarked. “We should ask him why he bought the house.”

“Hey! I think I found something!” Jupiter had leaned out of the window and scanned the outer frame. Then he pulled out a small piece of cable. “It was hidden between the window frame and the bricks.”

“What could it be?” Pete thought.

“I can tell you this, Pete,” Jupe said excitedly. “It’s a piece of detonator that blew out the window panes last night.”

“This is only a hunch, Jupe,” Bob warned.

“Sure. But an obvious one.”

Pete nodded. "Now we just have to find out who the perpetrator is, how he knows the Fire Demon, how he managed to cast all this magic and what he wants to do with it. Nothing could be easier."

It got dark when The Three Investigators and Mr Moore finally had all the windows sealed. Finally there was no longer a draught through the rooms and the candles could be lit again.

"Thank you so much for helping me." They stood in one of the countless empty rooms upstairs and it was the first time that day that Aaron Moore opened his mouth on his own. "I couldn't have done the work before nightfall without you." He looked embarrassed. "Also, I want to apologize to you I was a little rude last night. But my nerves were just shot and I couldn't remember what I said."

"No problem," assured Jupiter, "provided we can ask you a few more questions."

"Of course. Have you made any progress with your investigation?" Mr Moore asked.

"A little," Jupiter replied.

"Let's go downstairs," Mr Moore suggested. "It's more comfortable there."

Pete wondered what this man meant by 'comfortable', but he refrained from commenting.

They went into the mask room and Mr Moore lit the candles. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, gladly," replied Jupiter. "We've worked up quite a sweat."

"Mineral water? It's the best cure for thirst," Mr Moore suggested.

The Three Investigators nodded. Mr Moore left the room to go to the kitchen to get some glasses.

"Now he seems to be quite agreeable again," whispered Pete. "I hope this keeps up and he finally comes clean."

"I wouldn't necessarily—" Bob began.

Suddenly, a blood-curdling scream came from the kitchen.

8. The House of Spirits

The Three Investigators jumped up simultaneously and ran into the kitchen.

Mr Moore had his back to the wall and didn't move. His eyes, widened in terror, were pointed at the ground. Before his feet, laid the broken glass that he had apparently taken out of the cupboard. And between the splinters of glass were countless small brown worms.

Pete emitted a horrified gasp and Bob and Jupiter also had a cold shiver running down their spines.

"This is revenge," Moore pressed out, breathing heavily. "This is the revenge of the Fire Demon!"

"Calm down," said Jupiter urgently, although he too had to pull himself together to remain cool at this disgusting sight. "They're just mealworms. They're not dangerous at all."

"No!" cried Moore, staring at the First Investigator. "I should never have done it! This is retribution for my crime!"

Jupiter listened. "What crime?"

"That... it's a long story. Please... please get these... creatures out of my kitchen!"

Jupiter was not satisfied with this answer, but in this state there was no way out for Moore.

"Where did the worms come from?" Bob asked.

"They were... in the glass." Trembling, he pointed to the open kitchen cupboard.

Bob walked towards it, making a wide circle around the worms crawling on the floor, and looked carefully inside. At first sight nothing was to be seen. Reluctantly he reached for a cup. It was empty. He took a second one and placed it immediately on the shelf of the cupboard. Disgusted, he took two steps back and almost stepped onto the brown worms. He quickly made a jump to the side in fright.

"Eww!" he cried, shaking his foot in disgust.

"What? What was in there?" Pete asked.

"Maggots!" Bob replied and shivered. "Disgusting, fat, white maggots. I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Pull yourself together! Come on, fellas, we gotta get rid of this zoo." Jupiter had apparently regained control over himself.

"How?" Pete asked.

"We search every single container and if there is anything in it, we take it outside the house," Jupiter said. "Worms and maggots do much better in the wild anyway than in a kitchen cupboard."

Pete got nervous. But he realized that Jupiter was right. They were just critters. Nothing that could be really dangerous. Unless there were still some scorpions or... "Snakes!," it suddenly occurred to him. "We have to be careful, there might be a python or something lurking in there."

Jupiter ignored that remark. Courageously he stepped forward and searched cup after cup, glass after glass. "Do you have a hand-sweeper?" he asked Mr Moore, who still pressed himself against the wall with a chalky white face. "So that we can eliminate the mealworms."

"Yes... There... Over there behind the door," Mr Moore stammered.

Jupiter nodded. He set about sweeping up the worms and bringing them outside. In a total of seven glasses and cups a wide variety of critters curled up. Disgusted, Bob and Pete took them outside and set the animals free on the lawn. After ten minutes, the spook was over.

Mr Moore had calmed down a bit after he was sure that there were no more critters in his closet. Still a little dazed by the shock, they returned to the mask room.

"Thank you very much," Mr Moore said after he sat down. "I don't know if I would have been able to dispose of them."

"I don't want to worry you, but maybe that's not all. Pete is right. Spiders and snakes may still appear here somewhere or someone hasn't quite followed the literary model."

Moore frowned. "What do you think, Jupiter?"

"You know very well," Jupiter said. "I read the special Halloween edition of *Demon Zone* today. It described exactly the story you are experiencing. You must have noticed that, right? Why didn't you tell us?"

He lowered his eyes. "So you do know."

"We are investigating this case," Jupiter said. "But instead of telling us all the details, you're making our work harder. Why?"

Mr Moore sighed. "When I discovered the burning cross in the cemetery the night before last, I thought of an absurd coincidence—a stupid prank that has nothing to do with the Fire Demon. After all, I knew that the magazine would not be published until two days later. So I didn't worry too much. But when the windows exploded yesterday, I realized that it was no coincidence. That's why I'm so... hysterical. I didn't want you to know about it."

"Know about what?" Pete asked.

Moore was silent.

"About what?" Bob urged. "Mr Moore, if you want us to help you, we think it's about time to tell us the truth. Or do you want to end up like the character in your story? Do you know who is behind the attacks?"

A barely perceptible nod.

"Who is..." Bob continued.

"You will not believe me."

"Try it," Jupiter said.

"They are... the ghosts."

Bob trimmed. "What ghosts?"

"The spirits of Blackstone. They want to punish me."

Bob was about to refute this claim with indignation when Jupiter beat him to it. The First Investigator sensed that Mr Moore could not now be approached with logical arguments. Maybe it was better to let him talk first. "Suppose there really are ghosts in this house, Mr Moore. Why would they want to punish you?"

"Because I used them to make money. I used their story to write *The Fire Demon*."

"Could you please tell us about this from the beginning?" Jupiter asked.

Mr Moore took a deep breath and began: "Blackstone is not just any house. It is Bruce Black's life's work. He built it for a reason."

"He wanted a house that was haunted," Pete interrupted him. "We know. Energy fields and cosmic influences, I get it."

"Where did you get that from?" Mr Moore asked.

"We've done our research," the Second Investigator proudly announced.

For a moment fear flickered in Moore's eyes. "What else do you know?"

"Not much. Except that Black is apparently a... well, that he believed in ghosts and stuff. And that Blackstone was started and finished on Halloween."

Moore nodded. "I hardly knew anything about Bruce Black. I discovered this house rather by chance and I liked it right away. This unusual architecture... I thought this would be the perfect place to write scary stories. This is exactly how I had always imagined my workplace. When I heard that the house was up for sale and I bought it immediately.

"I only learned all the stories about supernatural powers when Blackstone was mine. I didn't think much of it, even made fun of it at first. But then I noticed that strange things were indeed going on within these walls. It's hard to describe—more of a feeling... never to be alone. This house is alive. I know it sounds crazy, but I felt surrounded by good powers."

"But at the moment, they seem to be rather evil forces," Pete interjected.

"That's right. Because I made a big mistake," Mr Moore continued. "I've lived here for two years. And in that time I wrote my very best stories. I feel comfortable here, even if many people cannot understand it. I now believe that there is indeed something to Bruce's visions. The location of the house, the rock it is built of, the sloping rooms—all this is so unreal that it attracts other unreal things."

"Spirits?" Jupiter asked.

"For example. In Blackstone, magic lives. You never see it, you never hear it, but you feel it when you've spent some time here."

"What was that mistake you were just talking about?" the First Investigator tried to return the conversation where he wanted it.

"I bought this house with almost every piece of furniture in it," Mr Moore said. "One day I discovered an old diary of Bruce Black in the library. In it he describes his plans for the construction of Blackstone. But then I read that he had other intentions with this house. He did not want to simply create a place where the real world and the other world could meet. He wanted more."

"Which is?" Jupiter asked.

Mr Moore's voice lowered to a whisper as if he feared being overheard. "He wanted to summon the spirits."

Bob gave a coughing fit. "The spirits?" he repeated.

"I know you don't believe me. Either you think I'm crazy or you think I'm playing something for you. But it's true, the diary said: Black belonged to a secret circle, a group of occultists called the Enigma Group. They met regularly here at Blackstone and conducted all sorts of strange experiments—devil worship, mysterious rituals, incantations and so on. I only understood half of what was in the diary myself.

"The occultists drew their knowledge of all these magical formulas and sorceries from ancient writings that they had collected all over the world. In one of these writings, a ritual was described with which one could summon a Fire Demon. This ritual lasted four days.

"The four elements—fire, air, earth and water—played an important role. In addition, a certain mask had to be procured, with the help of which the Fire Demon would appear on the last night. The Enigma Group performed this ritual."

"And did the demon really appear?" Pete asked incredulously.

"I don't know. On the fourth day the diary entries stop. And on the fifth, Bruce Black died. It was 31 October."

Jupiter nodded. "I almost thought so. Halloween has more than one meaning for Blackstone and his people."

"Do you believe that story—about summoning the demon, I mean?" Pete wanted to know.

"I'm not sure," Moore said. "But why would someone write such a thing in his diary? Why would Black tell a fairy tale with this story?"

“Then a few months ago, my publisher asked me to write a Halloween story for *Demon Zone*. That’s when the diary came back to my mind and I thought that the report on demon summoning would be a wonderful story for the series. Of course, I changed a lot, but I put the five most important elements into the story—the four characters and the mask of the Fire Demon. I wish I’d never done that!”

“Why? What’s the big deal?” Bob asked.

“I should have known—the spirits in this house, they’re watching me!” Mr Moore explained. “They know what I do, what I write, what goes on in my head. And I started writing the demon summoning story back then! And now the Fire Demon wants to take revenge on me! Because I betrayed his existence! Because I told the world his story to make money!” Moore glanced hurriedly from one to the other. He had grown pale.

With a trembling voice he continued: “The four elements! Three of them have already appeared. And tomorrow is Halloween, the night when the wall between worlds disappears. I can’t get away from him! The demon has driven someone to their death before—Bruce Black!”

The Three Investigators looked at each other at a loss. Moore believed what he said. They could only hope that their evidence would convince him otherwise. But before Jupiter could tell about their discoveries, Pete had one more question: “How... how did Bruce Black die, anyway?”

Moore had a long look at the Second Investigator. In a soundless voice he said: “It was suicide.”

9. The Servant of Evil

“Suicide,” Pete repeated and swallowed. “And... and why?”

Moore shrugged his shoulders and just said: “The Fire Demon,” as if that would explain everything.

Jupiter cleared his throat. “Anyway, Mr Moore. We can assure you that no Fire Demon was responsible for the events of the last two nights. Nor any other supernatural being.”

“You don’t believe me,” Moore noted. “I don’t blame you. That’s why I didn’t tell you the truth yesterday.”

“It’s not a question of faith,” the First Investigator contradicted. “We have evidence that whoever is harassing you is flesh and blood.”

He pulled the metal letter with the embossing stamp, the match and the piece of wire out of his pocket and placed them one after the other on the table. Then he told in detail about their discoveries and left no doubt about the evidences provided by the objects.

At the end of Jupiter’s report, Moore’s conviction seemed to falter. “It sounds plausible. But, uh... I really don’t know who would do such a thing. And why?”

“To the first question—there are two possible groups of people from which the suspect could come from. First, the members of this mysterious Enigma Group, since they are the only ones who know about the demon summons and the four elements. Second, the staff of your publishing house in New York. They read the *Demon Zone* manuscript before it was officially published. Can you think of anyone else who knows about the Fire Demon?”

Moore frowned and pondered, but finally he shook his head.

“You said that you had took some of Black’s diary entries for your story,” Bob began. “The events of the last days—do they resemble your *Demon Zone* magazine more, or what you read in the diary?”

“With my story,” Moore replied. “It almost all happened exactly as I wrote it.”

“This means that it is more likely that the perpetrator comes from the publisher,” Jupiter concluded. “Who reads your manuscripts before they are published?”

“Claudia Pacifer, my editor,” Mr Moore said. “But you’re not implying that she’s... No, no way! Why would she do this to me? She wouldn’t have any reason to. Claudia also lives in New York.”

“Are you sure she was in New York these last few days?” Jupiter asked.

“I called her just yesterday afternoon to let her know the new issue is ready.”

Jupiter pondered for a moment. “Did you call her or was it the other way round?”

“I called.”

“And was she immediately on the phone?” Jupiter asked.

“What does it matter?” Moore asked reluctantly. But then he frowned. “Now I remember. She was in a meeting and called me back later.”

“That means you don’t know for sure whether she really called from the East Coast,” Jupiter concluded.

“No,” Moore confessed. “But—”

“Is there anyone else who reads the story beforehand?” Jupiter interrupted him.

"No, nobody. At least nobody I know of," Mr Moore replied. "It is possible that the manuscript is read or corrected again in the typesetting department, but I do not know by whom. These people know me as little as I know them. Besides, very few people know where I live. I used my move to Blackstone, among other things, to wipe my address from the address books of many unpleasant people. Where I live is known only to friends and relatives, no one else."

Jupiter sighed "So there is no concrete suspect. Then we turn to the second question: What motive could the unknown have?"

"Revenge?" Bob said. "Or envy. Someone doesn't want you to succeed."

"Blackmail," countered Jupiter. "He wants something from you."

"Madness," Pete added. "A crazy horror fan who simply enjoys tormenting others."

"Or it really was the Fire Demon," said Mr Moore.

The First Investigator didn't go for it. "Could there be anyone out there who'd want to take revenge on you?"

"Of course not," Moore replied indignantly. "I feel like I'm in a police station. No, I have no enemies, if that's what you mean."

"Or someone who wants to buy the house?" Bob considered.

"People like that come along from time to time," Mr Moore said. "They read something about Blackstone, see it in photos and then ask if it is for sale. There was once a very persistent fellow who harassed me with letters for a while and offered me large sums of money... but I refused every time."

"How long has it been?" Bob asked.

Moore sighed. "Must have been four months. At some point that guy gave up."

"Did he get kind of assertive?" Jupiter asked.

"I never saw him in person or spoke to him. His offers always came by letter and I only replied in writing. So I can't tell you what kind of person he was. That reminds me, I can't even tell for sure if it was a man. He or she never gave a full name, but always signed with 'E. Curb'."

"So that doesn't help us either," Jupiter remarked.

"How about that," Pete tried his luck. "Someone wants you out of the house because they're looking for something specific that's hidden at Blackstone—an object of value, something from Bruce Black's estate that you haven't discovered yet."

"Hmm." Jupiter pinched his lower lip.

"Just what was that supposed to be?" Mr Moore wondered. "Blackstone is a small museum filled with strange artefacts, all of which once belonged to Bruce Black. You've seen them. But to my knowledge, there's nothing of real value here."

"There may be something hidden in one of the sculptures," said Pete. "But we can't possibly investigate them all. It'll take us weeks. And all we have left is—"

"One day," Jupiter finished the sentence. "That's the problem. Tomorrow we must succeed in catching the perpetrator in the act. For us to be successful, we need to know how he operates. So let's turn to the next question: How did Mr X manage to make the three elements appear to you?"

"In case number one, it's quite simple. He made a wooden cross, bought metal letters from the Miller company in New York, put the cross up, probably doused it with alcohol and lit it on fire with a match. Immediately afterwards he disappeared into the woods without you seeing him.

"Number two is more difficult. We are still waiting for the results from the police lab, but everything suggests that miniature explosives were attached to each window pane and

detonated in sequence by radio. However, this requires a lot of preparation. So somebody must have been working on Blackstone unnoticed by you. Have you been out of the house for a while lately?"

"Three weeks ago, I was in San Francisco for a few days with a friend."

"Uh-huh. Enough time then, to prepare the windows without being seen," Jupiter said. "Blackstone is so remote that people probably seldom stray here. There are opportunities to set things up as you'll be undisturbed for hours."

"But now things are getting complicated," Pete said. "How did the intruder put the worms and maggots in the kitchen cabinet?"

"More important is the question: When did he do it?" Jupe said. "Have you opened the cabinet today, Mr Moore?"

He pondered for a while. "Yes. This morning. And again in the afternoon, just before you came. I'm sure I would've noticed those disgusting worms if they'd been there at the time."

"That means that someone must have brought them into the house while we were here!" Pete shouted startled. "That's impossible! We were at the windows the whole time. We should have seen who did it!"

"Maybe it was at the time when we were all on the other side of the house," Bob suggested.

"But then it would have been very risky for Mr X to sneak into the house. Nothing doing! And he can't have been in the house already, because after all we entered every room." Pete involuntarily threw a look over his shoulder as if he believed the stranger behind him.

"Another mystery," Jupiter noted. "One of the four elements is still to come—water."

"In your story, what happened on the fourth day?" Bob wanted to know.

Mr Moore laughed insecurely. "It rained blood."

"Excuse me?" Bob asked, puzzled.

"A storm came and instead of water, a rain of blood fell on the house. If this happens tomorrow, you too will be convinced that it is indeed the Fire Demon. Because nobody can really do that with a trick. Or do you—" He broke off and stared at The Three Investigators one after the other with narrowed eyes.

"Mr Moore? What's the matter?" Bob asked.

"What... what were you going to say?" Pete asked anxiously when he did not answer.

"It was you!" Mr Moore hissed suddenly.

"Excuse me?" Bob said.

"You're behind the whole thing!"

"What... what do you mean?" Pete asked.

"Do not deny it!" His voice swelled to a hysterical scream. "It's all clear to me now! Only you can have dragged the worms into my kitchen today, no one else could do it! And it's also no coincidence that the windows exploded shortly after you left Blackstone! After all, you didn't want to put yourself in danger by the flying fragments. But at the same time you were still so close that you could come back and lead me on a wrong track, like you do all the time!"

Jupiter laughed briefly. "With all due respect, sir, I think that's a bad—"

"I am serious, Jupiter Jones! That was exactly how it happened! You showed up here and besieged my house—to investigate as you call it! Ha! And then you bring in alleged evidence to divert my suspicion from you. It was very clever to explore all the possibilities of how the perpetrator could have entered the house. But I don't believe you anymore!" Furiously he struck the table.

“Mr Moore!” cried Pete in indignation. “That’s a lot of nonsense! Why would we do such a thing?”

“You are acting on behalf of the spirits,” he shouted in a shrill voice. “The Fire Demon himself can only appear on Halloween night. Before that, he needs helpers—you!”

“But, Mr Moore!” Bob tried.

“Do not deny it! You’re connected to the dark forces! I felt it from the beginning!” Moore had talked himself into such a rage that he had got up with a bright red head and was now shouting around loudly. “I saw through you! You’re playing the black magic game. But not with me! Get out of here!”

“Mr Moore! I must strongly oppose—” Jupiter began.

“Out, I said! Out!”

Hesitantly, The Three Investigators stood up. “You are wrong! Listen to us for a minute!” Jupiter tried to explain.

“So you can tell me more nonsense?” Mr Moore argued. “No way! The minute you open your mouth, lies come out. I won’t listen to you any more! You have one minute to leave Blackstone! Or I’ll call the police!”

When The Three Investigators still did not move, Moore stomped out of the room with hurried steps.

“He’s crazy!” Pete got excited. “Is he really calling the police or what?”

“Let him,” Jupe said. “We have Inspector Cotta on our side.”

But only a moment later, Moore came back—with a gun in his hand. “You’re amazed, aren’t you?” he laughed. “I knew I needed something like this in a big, out-of-the-way place like Blackstone. I won’t be able to chase away the Fire Demon with it, but I will certainly be able to chase away his servants! You have thirty seconds to get out of here.”

Jupiter did not like to be falsely accused and even more it went against the grain for him to give in. But Moore was so upset that Jupiter believed that he was capable of anything at that moment.

“Let’s get out of here,” he whispered to his friends and the three detectives left the house as quickly as possible.

Moore remained in the doorway until they had left the property on their bikes and disappeared into the forest.

“I can’t believe it!” cried Pete for the hundredth time when they reached Headquarters. By now he was as angry as Moore was half an hour before. “You offer to help someone, put yourself in danger, and then this! I’m telling you, fellas, this guy’s nuts! He’s a nut case! We’re supposed to be accomplices of the Fire Demon! Have you ever heard such nonsense? Let him see where he is with his Fire Demon! I’m not going back there.”

“That wouldn’t be advisable right now either, unless you want to end up with a bullet in your body,” said Bob, who was no less indignant. “What a weirdo! I knew right from the start that he was no longer ticking properly, but then he completely freaked out. Horror writer! This is probably what happens when you sit all day in a house like Blackstone and brood over ghosts and demons. Jupe, what do you say?”

The First Investigator kept a low profile. “I’ll have to think about this very carefully.” He opened the padlock on the trailer door and entered Headquarters. Exhausted, he let himself fall onto the desk chair.

“There’s nothing to think about!” cried Pete. “Just don’t tell me you want to keep working on this case. As far as I’m concerned, the matter is closed.”

“But we still have a lead to follow,” said Jupe. “The ominous editor. It’s just a theory, but wouldn’t it be possible that she has been around for days and days and is only pretending to be in New York? First thing tomorrow morning, I’m gonna call the publisher and check out Claudia Pacifer.”

Pete sighed. If there was a puzzle to solve, Jupiter Jones could not be stopped. It was no use trying to talk him out of it. “There are two lines on the answering machine. If that’s Moore, I’m not interested!” Jupiter switched on the tape and hoped for something different.

“Cotta here. I must be brief. The results from the lab just came in. The sample you took, Jupiter, is the residue from a plastic explosive. Looks like someone mixed it himself, so the explosive power was not very high, but an explosive nonetheless. What are you boys mixed up in again? I know you won’t tell me until you solve the case, but don’t burn your fingers!” It beeped.

“I thought so,” said Jupiter. “At least one mystery solved.” He let the tape run on.

“Hi, you three. This is Roxanne. I have incredible news! You have to call me tonight! You remember the mask of the Fire Demon from the book of the same name? This exact mask appeared today. Here in the shop!”

10. The Mask of the Fire Demon

“What does it mean now?” moaned Pete. “Now she’s getting on my nerves with her crazy talk.”

“Who knows,” replied Jupiter and reached for the telephone receiver.

“You want to call her now?” Pete asked.

“Of course,” Jupiter replied. “Maybe it’s important.”

“It was bound to happen,” Pete said. “As soon as we dropped the case, something happens and you can’t let go again.”

“Wait a minute,” Jupiter defended himself. “We haven’t decided anything. Rather, it is the case that you take the slightest inconvenience as an opportunity to throw everything away. If Roxanne has something enlightening to say, we will naturally continue.”

“What if Moore won’t let us near his house anymore?” Bob asked.

“We’ll think of something.” Determined, the First Investigator switched on the loudspeaker and dialled the number.

“Yeah?” Roxanne answered.

“Hi, Roxanne, this is Jupiter. What were you saying about the mask?”

“It’s in Mrs Goldenberg’s shop.”

“What do you mean?” Jupiter asked. “They don’t exist. It’s an invention of Aaron Moore.”

“They do exist. It is also an invention of Mrs Goldenberg. Or rather a creation. She made them herself.”

“Could you be more specific?”

“As I told Pete, Mrs Goldenberg is very good with her hands. She carved some of the masks in her shop. And today I happened to be in her workshop and I saw there the exact mask that Mr Moore described in his book—and which is also on the cover.”

“How is that possible?”

“That’s what I wondered—and I finally asked Mrs Goldenberg about it. She told me that two weeks ago a man came into her shop with an order. He wanted her to make a mask for him following a specific description.”

“What kind of description?”

“A passage from a story.”

“I hope Mrs Goldenberg still has this passage of text?”

“Yes. I read it. It’s a passage from *The Fire Demon*. I recognized it immediately. Incredible, isn’t it? What do you say?”

“Who was the client?”

“Mrs Goldenberg doesn’t know that. He didn’t give his name, but made a deposit so large that she accepted the job without question.”

“And the mysterious stranger will come for the mask by tomorrow, won’t he?” Jupiter surmised.

Roxanne was confused. “How do you know that?”

“Because he needs them tomorrow night to make the Fire Demon appear—plain and simple,” Jupiter explained. “When exactly does he want to come into the shop?”

"Tomorrow noon."

"Wonderful. Let's take a closer look at him." Now it was Jupiter's turn. He told the eagerly listening Roxanne about their eventful day.

She was horrified to hear that Mr Moore had accused The Three Investigators of being emissaries of the Fire Demon.

"I can hardly imagine that!" she exclaimed. "He's such a nice man!"

"Not to us."

"I'll talk to him first thing tomorrow. Believe me, he'll listen to me."

"Better not do that," Jupiter quickly said, fearing that Roxanne could be infected by Moore's stories. "I will go to him again myself. Maybe by then he'll have realized that he was wrong. After all, he already snapped yesterday and apologized to us today. The good man is a bit fickle. Bob and Pete will come to your shop in the morning. They will watch and follow Mr X."

"How exciting! May I join you?"

"If you don't fool around, yes." They set a time, then Jupiter hung up.

"Well, that's something," Pete thought. "Great! By the way, that you didn't even ask for our opinion again."

"Come on, Pete," Bob said, punching him in the shoulder. "It's obvious we're in, right?"

"Well," hummed the Second Investigator reluctantly. "As long as Jupe can deal with Mr Moore and we can take care of other things, it's fine with me. Jupe? What are you pinching your lip again?"

"I just thought of something," Jupe said. "Isn't it a little odd that Mr X goes to the store where Aaron Moore is a regular customer?"

"Probably a coincidence," Pete said.

"Or a hint of a possibility that we have so far completely ignored," Jupe said.

"Which one?" Pete asked.

"That Moore himself is behind this whole thing," Jupiter said.

"Well, it's a fascinating idea," said Pete as he drove Bob in his MG towards Santa Monica at eleven o'clock the next day. "But I still don't believe it." They had decided to drive there in case they had to follow Mr X.

"She sounds a little crazy," Bob admitted, "but why not? Jupiter is already right when he says that Moore himself can be responsible for everything that has happened."

"And what would he be trying to pull on us like this?"

"Maybe *Demon Zone* isn't working as well as everyone thinks, and he needs some publicity," Bob said. "He told Roxanne about the burning cross because he knew she was into the supernatural and would be on fire immediately."

"The conversation that you overheard may have been a coincidence, but it came to Moore very conveniently. When the story about the four elements and the Fire Demon appears in the newspaper, the circulation of *The Fire Demon* is bound to go through the counter at breakneck speed. But of course Moore needs witnesses to make the press believe the story—us. It wouldn't be the first time we've been taken in by a scam of this nature."

"Already," Pete admitted. "But then it must have been Moore who commissioned the mask from Mrs Goldenberg. She knows him. But she didn't know who the client was."

"Maybe just a middleman," Bob suggested. "Hopefully we'll find out soon enough. In any case, we should not lose sight of Jupe's idea, but continue to observe Mr Moore closely. Maybe everything is completely different, but our horror author leaves me with an

increasingly strange impression. I'm sure he's hiding something and he hasn't told us everything."

They reached the colourful coastal town and drove along the beach promenade where there were many joggers and skaters. Five minutes later, they turned left into one of Santa Monica's many shopping streets until they finally stopped in a somewhat secluded side street in front of Mrs Goldenberg's mask shop. There were many customers, but just before Halloween night, they were not surprised. They quickly let their eyes glide over the faces of the customers. Has the mystery man been in yet? And would he recognize them?

"Can I help you?" A small, roundish woman had appeared behind them and looked up at them through thick glasses.

"Yeah, uh, we're looking for Roxanne," Pete said.

"Ah, then you must be these detectives she told me about," she exclaimed happily. Bob and Pete looked around uncertainly to see if anyone had noticed them. "I'm Kathy Goldenberg. Pleased to meet you." She shook hands with them both eagerly. "So you're investigating a criminal case? And my mask has something to do with it? How exciting!"

"Uh, is Roxanne here?" Pete asked, before Mrs Goldenberg could tell all the customers the story.

"Yeah, yeah, she's in the back office, just come with me. But I'm afraid she doesn't have good news for you."

She led them through the store into a small adjoining room where Roxanne sat at a computer and worked. "Ah, there you are," she said.

"Hi. Mrs Goldenberg said there were bad news," Pete said.

"Yes." Roxanne lowered her gaze in a depressed state. "You're too late. Mr X was here first thing this morning. The mask is gone."

Shortly after Bob and Pete had left Rocky Beach, Jupiter got on the phone. He called the publishing house in New York for the second time, but this time he was connected to the editorial office.

"Fluky House Publishing, Hine?" a woman's voice came up.

"Good afternoon, I'd like to speak to Miss Claudia Pacifer."

"I'm sorry, she's not here right now."

"May I ask where she is?"

"In a meeting," was the short answer.

"It is very urgent," Jupiter said. "Would it be possible to get her on the phone?"

"Out of the question. But she'll call back if you give me your name and phone number."

"No, I'll call back later," assured Jupiter. "When will she be available again?"

"I can't say that for the life of me," Miss Hine replied.

"Fine," mumbled Jupiter. "I'll be in touch." Frustrated, he hung up. Claudia Pacifer was in another meeting. A coincidence?

Jupiter left Headquarters and headed for Blackstone. While he was pedalling up the mountain road, he was already preparing the words with which he wanted to reassure Mr Moore in case he threatened him a second time with a gun. But he hoped it didn't come to that.

On the other hand, he couldn't get his thoughts from last night out of his head. What if Moore had actually staged everything himself? Then his outburst yesterday could mean that they had got too close to some secret.

The First Investigator reached the forest path and a few minutes later he saw the house. The plastic sheets in the windows fluttered in a light breeze, otherwise nothing moved. With a lump in his throat, he approached the black walls. He climbed up the sloping steps to the door, took another deep breath and rapped the door knocker. No one opened and there was no sound. He knocked again, this time a little louder. Jupe waited a minute. When still nothing moved, he went around the house once. Mr Moore's car was at the back, so he hadn't left. Maybe he wouldn't open the door. But Jupiter had to talk to him!

"Mr Moore!" he shouted. "Open up, please! We should clear up a few things." No answer.

"Mr Moore! Please, we should talk about the whole thing again!" As before, everything remained quiet. Moore couldn't be that stubborn.

Had anything happened to him? Jupiter's heart was beating faster. At one of the windows on the ground floor a plastic sheet had come loose and was rattling in the wind. Jupiter hesitated for a moment, then he went over and climbed into the house.

"If Moore catches me now, he won't believe a word I say. But I'll have to take that risk," he murmured and set off in search of him. The rooms downstairs were deserted. Only the staring eyes of the omnipresent masks followed his every move.

When he finally entered the hall, he heard a noise. There was running water somewhere. The noise came from upstairs. Jupiter went upstairs and finally stood at the door to the bathroom. Mr Moore was taking a shower! Logically, he had not heard Jupiter. The First Investigator hesitated briefly, then knocked on the door. "Mr Moore?"

No answer.

"Mr Moore, it's me, Jupiter Jones! I'm sorry for intruding in the house, but..." Suddenly Jupiter noticed that the noise... was too even. Perhaps there was nobody in the shower!

Once again panic rose in him. He banged on the door with all his might. Then he pushed the handle down. At first he saw only white clouds of steam. Then his eyes fell on something that made him freeze. The shower curtain, the walls and the floor in front of the shower tray were red.

Mr Moore was lying on the floor, covered in blood!

11. Bloodbath

“He was already there?” Pete repeated. “You’ve got to be kidding me! Did you see him?”

“No. I’ve only been here an hour myself. I’m sorry, but nobody could have known.”

“What a bummer,” Bob cursed. “Fate is not kind to us. First the cross, then the windows and worms, now the mask—each time the perpetrator disappears without a trace. There’s no justice in that!”

“Did Mrs Goldenberg give him the mask?” Pete asked.

Roxanne nodded.

“And she knows?” Pete continued.

“Sort of. I haven’t told her everything. Just that it’s about the mask, and that it’s very important.”

“Fine. Then we’ll talk to her,” Pete said. “Maybe she can give us a description of the man.”

Roxanne laughed softly. “I hardly think so.”

“Why not? I think she has—”

“You can try.”

Bob and Pete went back to the store, waited until Kathy Goldenberg completed serving her customer, and asked her who collected the mask.

“Well,” she started and smiled sheepishly. “What can I say? He wasn’t very tall.”

Bob and Pete waited, but that seemed to be the end of Mrs Goldenberg’s description.

“And?” Bob asked.

“He had dark hair.”

“Black or brown?”

“Well, more like black.”

“How old was he?” Bob probed further. “Did he have glasses, a beard, what kind of hairstyle did he have and what kind of clothes?”

“No beard, I think. But so exactly...” Mrs Goldenberg looked carefully to the left and right, then whispered to them: “I am very near-sighted. My glasses haven’t been good enough for years, but I haven’t had a chance to get a new pair yet.”

Bob suppressed a grin. “That means you can’t describe him in any more detail?”

“I’m afraid not. I think he was about fifty, by the sound of his voice. But I’m afraid that’s all I can say.”

Bob sighed. “All right. Can you tell us if the man had any special requests?”

“Special requests? No. He wanted me to carve a mask for him that looked exactly like it was described in the text—a demon with fanged teeth and fire instead of hair. And he paid well for it. If I knew there was a crime behind it, I never would have taken the job in the first place!”

“That was quite right,” said Pete. “At least now we have a lead that we wouldn’t have had without you.”

Mrs Goldenberg was radiant. “Yes, in that case. You must tell me how the story goes. But, as you can see, I’m a little busy right now.”

“All right,” Pete said. “Have a nice day.”

Frustrated, the two of them went to Roxanne and reported to her.

"Today is Halloween," Bob muttered. "We haven't made any progress and we only have a few hours left."

"In any case, I won't be able to help you anymore," Roxanne said quickly. "I won't want to go back to Blackstone so soon. Especially not tonight."

"I'd rather go to Jeffrey's party too," Pete said.

"But I'm sure Jupiter has other plans." Roxanne wished them good luck and then said goodbye.

"So what now?" Pete asked as they stood on the street.

"That was a shot in the dark. What do we do now? I don't want to go after Jupe. I'd like him to take care of Mr Moore by himself."

"Research," Bob decided. "We still know far too little about Aaron Moore and his strange house. Maybe we can find out something about this Enigma Group. This time we'll try the *Los Angeles Times* archives, which might be more useful than the Rocky Beach Public Library."

They were about to get on their bikes when Kathy Goldenberg came running out of the store. "Stop! Wait! I have something else for you!"

"What, Mrs Goldenberg?" Pete asked.

"In all the excitement, I forgot that I have a photo of the mask. When I sell my self-made pieces, I always take a photo beforehand. Roxanne thinks it might be of some use to you."

"Yes, thank you," Bob said, took the photo and looked at it. The mask was really well done, it looked very similar to the drawing on the cover of the *Demon Zone* magazine.

"And another thing. I had the man sign a receipt. At first he did not want to, but I claimed that I urgently needed this for my bookkeeping. After all, he did it. In reality, I can't do anything with his signature, but I knew you were looking for him. Here you go!" She handed them some kind of receipt.

"That was great of you, Mrs Goldenberg!" cried Pete. "That'll help us."

"Nice to meet you." She took a few steps, smiling happily backwards. "I have to go back to the store. See you soon!"

"But she could have said that earlier," groaned the Second Investigator as they were alone on the street again. "What does it say?"

"I am not one hundred percent sure," Bob replied as he inspected the document. "But I can read from the signature 'E. Curb'."

"Curb? Why does that name mean anything to me?" Pete asked, puzzled.

"Because that's the name of the man who wanted to buy Blackstone," Bob thought. "Remember? Mr Moore mentioned a very persistent prospective buyer."

"My goodness," Pete gasped. "Then we have the motive! And because Mr Moore refused, that somebody is gonna set off one hell of a fireworks display."

"Don't be hasty," Bob warned. "We only know the name of the perpetrator—but we still have no idea who is behind it and what he wants. Is he concerned about Blackstone itself—or maybe something hidden in the house?"

"How do we find out?" Pete asked.

"By locating this Curb. Mr Moore received letters from him, and he only replied in writing. So the letters must have the sender's address on them."

"So we're going to Blackstone now?" Pete wasn't at all comfortable with the idea.

"No. We're going to the newspaper archives as planned. Jupe has to convince Mr Moore that we're on his side first. Depends on what happens, we can still go there later. Anyway, the fourth element should not appear until it's dark."

There was blood everywhere. Moore's hair and his whole body was red.

Jupiter got dizzy. He had never seen anything so horrible, and he was about to faint. He took a deep breath once—and inhaled the smell of blood. Then he closed his eyes, counted slowly to five and finally entered the bathroom with trembling knees. The humidity and heat in the bathroom made him dizzy, so he went to the shower first and turned it off. Then he bent over Mr Moore's still body.

He was dead! He had to be dead to lose that much blood. Jupiter was about to call the ambulance, but then he saw that Moore's chest was moving. He was breathing! And it's very calm and even.

"Mr Moore!" cried Jupiter and turned the man on his back. "Hold on! I'll get a doctor immediately!"

He jumped up and ran out into the study where there was a telephone. With trembling fingers, he dialled the emergency service number and reported what had happened. The woman at the other end promised that an ambulance would be there in five minutes.

Then Jupiter returned. Moore lay unchanged on the ground. Goodness, where did all that blood come from? It stopped flowing, so the wound was obviously already crusted. But a wound from which so much...

He reached for a towel and carefully wiped Moore's chest clean with it. Then the arms and legs. He washed out the towel and kept looking for an injury. There wasn't any. When the wet cloth touched Moore's face, his eyelids fluttered.

"Mr Moore? Wake up!"

The author moaned, turned his head to the side and opened his eyes. When he recognized Jupiter, he was startled, but then he calmed down quickly. "What... where am I?"

"In your bathroom. Are you hurt?"

"Headache," Moore muttered. "Nothing else..." He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"What happened? What can you remember?"

"Shower... Blood! My goodness, the blood!" Horrified, he opened his eyes and raised his head to look down on himself.

Jupiter had not been able to get rid of all the blood so he still looked quite horrible. The First Investigator himself did not give a better picture. "That's not your blood, is it?"

Moore closed his eyes with a groan. Jupiter could not say whether it was because of pain or because the sight of the blood that disgusted him.

"No," he gasped. "It came from... the shower. When I stood under it for a minute, it was... suddenly all red. Oh, my goodness!" His face colour suddenly turned white.

Jupiter quickly grabbed a few towels from the cupboard and put Moore's legs up.

"And then you fell out of the shower and fainted?" Jupiter asked, so that Mr Moore remained conscious.

He nodded slightly.

"And that's when you hit your head."

Moore didn't answer anymore, he was just shaking. Jupiter took another stack of towels and covered Moore with them. Then he heard a car. "One moment, I'll be right back."

He ran downstairs and let the paramedics in. "On the first floor. Nothing dramatic, even if it looks that way at first. The man is in shock and probably has a concussion."

"You should let us judge that," one of the men said and ran up the stairs.

It took Jupiter a while to reassure them that the blood did not come from Mr Moore. Because of his collapse and the head injury from the fall, they took him with them anyway.

“Are you a relative?”

“Uh... yes, his brother,” Jupiter claimed.

“You wanna come to the hospital?”

“No, I... I’ll join you later.”

“We’re taking him to St John’s Hospital.”

“All right.”

Two minutes later, Jupiter was alone at Blackstone—alone with a huge pool of blood and an even bigger mystery.

12. The Search for Secrets

“Jupe will be amazed when we tell him what we have found out,” Pete rejoiced and waved the copies or reports they had obtained at the *Los Angeles Times*. Bob’s father worked there and he had helped them gain access to the newspaper’s archives.

“But he won’t be too happy when we tell him Mr X got away,” Bob said.

“He’ll forgive us when we present the name to him,” the Second Investigator assured.

They had spent two hours in the basement of the newspaper building until they had found what they were looking for. Now it was early afternoon, their stomachs were growling, but they were desperate to tell Jupe the news before they went home for lunch. Hopefully he was already back.

Pete drove back to Headquarters. When they entered the trailer, nobody was there, but there was a message on the answering machine.

“Bob and Pete, this is Jupe. I hope your morning was successful and you have put all the criminals of the city behind bars. With me it was rather unpleasant. If you want to know why I sat in Mr Moore’s bathroom today, covered in blood, come to Blackstone later. Bring your sleeping things—and mine too; and at least three flashlights. It is quite possible that we will have to spend the night here tonight. And more importantly, bring something to eat! I’m starving. Moore’s cupboards are full of noodles, but I can’t find anything that could be made into a sauce. So, see you later!”

“Covered in blood?” Bob repeated. “Did he really say that? It sounds as if Jupe has experienced something even more spectacular than we have. He’s always stealing our thunder.”

“Bring sleeping bags,” muttered the Second Investigator. “I suspected it. We’re gonna spend Halloween in the scariest house in all of California. That’ll be fun!”

An hour later, Pete and Bob arrived in the MG at Blackstone—loaded with sleeping bags, toothbrushes and ingredients for an excellent pasta sauce. The First Investigator was already waiting for them and opened the door.

“What have you done?” cried Pete in horror when he saw Jupe’s red stained T-shirt. “Did Mr Moore... did he freak out again? Did he attack you? Oh, my goodness!”

“Don’t panic, Pete. It wasn’t Moore. He is the victim.”

“The victim?” Pete exclaimed. “What’s the meaning of this? Has Mr X been here? Was there a fight? My goodness, Jupe, say something!”

“Come in first,” Jupe calmly suggested. “Then I’ll tell you everything. Did you bring any food?”

“Yes. Where’s Mr Moore?” Bob asked.

“At the hospital.”

“What?” Bob exclaimed.

But the First Investigator insisted that a proper meal had to be served before he said another word. With this he managed to have Bob and Pete cook the noodles in no time and prepare a sauce without having to lift a finger. They preferred to eat in the small kitchen

rather than in the cold and unfriendly dining room. The kitchen was one of the few rooms in which one did not constantly have the feeling of being watched.

"There," Bob said determinedly as the table was set. "Now talk."

"All right." While Jupiter was shovelling the noodles into himself, he told his friends about his turbulent morning.

A shiver ran down Pete's spine involuntarily. "Blood from the shower! Maybe you should have told the story after dinner. Now I've lost my appetite thoroughly."

"And I was so thoughtful about it, I already cleaned the bathroom to spare you the sight. That was a mess," Jupe said.

"Was it really blood?" Bob asked.

Jupiter nodded. "Some kind of animal blood, I suppose."

"And how did it get, pray tell, into the shower?" Pete asked.

"We have yet to find that out. We have plenty of time," Jupiter continued. "Because I just got off the phone with Mr Moore at the hospital. He does have a concussion and is in severe shock. His circulation has to recover first, they want to keep him there tonight. He no longer believes that we are responsible for all this. Must have been another one of his short circuit reactions yesterday. Anyway, I promised him we'd spend the night here to guard the house."

"Are you crazy?" cried Pete in horror. "Today is Halloween! You're not seriously thinking about spending the night in that haunted house? What do we do if... if the Fire Demon does show up?"

"Pete!" Jupe said reproachfully. "The Fire Demon exists only in Mr Moore's imagination."

"But Mr X is real," Pete exclaimed.

"I don't think he's planning anything for tonight, when he finds out Blackstone has visitors. Besides, he's not after us. He's after Mr Moore. But now tell me—what happened this afternoon? Have you seen Mr X?"

Now it was Bob's turn to describe the events of the day.

"Curb also," muttered Jupe when Bob finished, and delved into the signature on the receipt. "Even though Mrs Goldenberg couldn't describe him exactly, was she sure it was a man?"

"What's with the stupid question?" Pete asked.

"I called the publisher today. Moore's editor was not available again. But now I guess she's not a suspect. Nevertheless, some questions remain unanswered."

"We have even more answers," Pete proudly announced and pulled a few copies out of his backpack. "Here... Newspaper articles about Bruce Black and the Enigma Group, among others. Mr Moore has only told us half of what we now found out."

"Here we go," Bob began. "Two years ago, one night before Halloween, a small group of people were arrested by the police while they were breaking into a museum."

"The Enigma Group?"

"Right. Bruce Black, in particular. For he was not only a member, but their leader. Black himself managed to escape, all others were arrested. It turned out that the Enigma people had already committed an enormous number of art thefts. Small things, not in museums, but from private collectors.

"Remember Moore told us they were compiling ancient magical texts? Well, actually, these were mainly valuable books from the Middle Ages, in which supposedly contained spells or descriptions of magical rituals. And they didn't just collect them, they stole them. All members of the Enigma Group went to jail. They're still sitting there, by the way. When

they broke into the museum, however, they were not looking for old manuscripts, but rather —”

“A mask,” Jupiter suspected.

“Right. The mask of the Fire Demon. It’s real. We found a photo of it.” Pete handed it to the First Investigator.

“Looks almost exactly like ours,” Bob said, comparing it to the photo of the mask made by Mrs Goldenberg. “The original is still hanging in the museum. The Enigma Group probably actually believed that it has magical powers and that you can summon a demon with its help.”

“Crazy,” said Jupiter, shaking his head. “And Bruce Black?”

“The police quickly located his residence, but by the time they arrived at Blackstone, it was already too late. Black had swallowed poison. He was buried here at his request. The police combed Blackstone and found many of the stolen old books and art objects.”

“Not all?”

Bob shook his head. “Many items were never found. The members of the Enigma Group swore that they do not know where the items were.”

“At least not at Blackstone,” said Jupiter. “Otherwise the police would have found them. Bruce Black must have hidden the items and taken the secret with him to his grave. That’s a pretty hair-raising story. Anything else?”

“That’s all we have,” Bob said.

“You got that right.” Jupiter struck the table with his flat hand. “I’d like to know if our mysterious Mr Curb has anything to do with the Enigma Group. Come on, fellas, let’s get to work!”

“What work?” Pete wanted to know.

“We have a unique opportunity to examine Blackstone undisturbed. And we should use it. Pete, you’re going to look for Mr Curb’s letters. After all, we need his address to catch him.

“Bob, you’re going to look for clues as to a connection between Moore and Black. I want to know if Moore is really as clueless as he pretends to be. Or whether he actually knows the whole story and has kept the juicy details from us. And if so, why. Meanwhile, I’ll try to find out how the blood got in the water pipe.”

“I don’t know,” Pete hesitantly threw in. “I have a bad feeling about snooping through Mr Moore’s papers. Don’t you think it would be wiser to wait until he’s out of the hospital? Then we can just ask him.”

“And you think he’ll tell us the truth this time?” Juve argued. “No, Pete. Moore’s been lying to us from the beginning and I want to find out why.”

“But we have no right to ransack his house,” the Second Investigator insisted.

“Who said anything about ransacking? I’m sure Mr Moore won’t mind if we follow Mr Curb’s trail. For that we need his address. And there’s no time to waste. If we come across anything else in the search for Curb’s letters, it’s just a silly coincidence.” He grinned broadly.

“But it wouldn’t be coincidence, it would be intentional,” Pete contradicted.

“Do we want to solve the case or not?” Jupiter asked angrily.

“Sure. But—”

“Then we must act now,” Jupiter insisted.

“What if we do Mr Moore wrong? When he has nothing to hide?” Pete continued his objections.

“Then we would be ashamed of ourselves,” Jupiter returned dryly. “But believe me, he’s hiding something.”

13. Entrance to the Underworld

“I don’t feel comfortable with this,” Pete repeated when he entered the study with Bob. While the Bob single-mindedly walked towards the huge shelf which were bent under the load of countless files, Pete remained standing undecidedly in the door.

“Where to start? I’m not going to take out every single folder and look through it.”

Bob snorted impatiently. “They are marked. So I’m certainly not going to go through the tax documents. Sometimes you’re a real pain in the ass, Pete.”

While Bob examined the folders one by one, Pete ventured further into the room. He went to the desk, stroked the computer keyboard, lifted a small stack of notepads listlessly and dropped it again. “I don’t like this.”

“You said that already,” Bob said over his shoulder. His attention was distracted by a file folder with the inscription ‘Blackstone’.

“What have we here? That looks interesting,” he murmured, pulled out the folder and began to flip through it.

Pete opened a box of disks and read the inscriptions—all titles of old *Demon Zone* books. He wouldn’t find anything exciting here. Then his gaze fell on the head of a strange creature that looked at him with big eyes. The head was made of clay and served as a paperweight. Underneath was a large pile of letters. Pete picked up the letters and went through them.

“That was quicker than I thought,” he said in surprise when he discovered an envelope on which the sender had written ‘E. Curb’ on it. “I found what we’re looking for.”

He took out the letter from the envelope and briefly skimmed its contents. “An offer to buy, as Mr Moore had said. With a handsome sum!”

“We’re not interested in the price,” Bob replied. “Only the address of Curb.”

“Well,” Pete sighed and held the paper out to Bob.

“Nothing.”

“A P. O. Box in Poughkeepsie, New York?” Bob noted with a glance at the letterhead. “What a bummer.”

“We should have thought so,” Pete claimed. “It would have been far too easy.”

“All right. Look through the other letters, maybe you’ll get lucky and find another one from Curb with his real address in it.”

While Pete continued to search, Bob again dealt with the ‘Blackstone’ folder. But instead of the hoped-for secrets, only electricity bills and receipts for costs relating to the house were found. Disappointed, he turned the pages, but then he discovered something that made him gasp for air.

“Pete!” he shouted.

“What is it?”

“You won’t believe what I just discovered here!”

“What?”

“Letters and deeds from a notary.”

Pete pulled a disappointed face. “So? What does it say?”

“You’ll never guess!”

Undecidedly, the First Investigator stood in the bathroom, which only a few hours ago had resembled the scene of a horrible crime. Now all traces of blood had been removed, but the picture that had presented itself to him was still very vivid in Jupiter's memory.

Shivering, he forced himself to concentrate. He wanted to find out where the blood had come from. Somehow Curb—if he really was the culprit—must have got it into the water pipe. But how was Jupiter to find the exact origin?

"The basement," he muttered, turned his back on the bathroom and went downstairs.

Under the stairs leading to the upper floor there was a small wooden door with a devil's face carved into it. The entrance to the underworld, Jupe thought. Armed with his flashlight, he opened the door. The stairs were steep, the steps were crooked and sloping, as if to warn anyone who had the courage to climb down.

"It's only the basement," Jupiter tried to calm himself and went down the first step. The door fell shut behind him. Jupiter opened it again, but it was no use. It had been hung in the frame in such a way that it would close again and again by itself. This was probably also an intended detail of Blackstone's sophisticated architecture. He descended the stairs. It was a spiral staircase that led much deeper than Jupiter had guessed.

When he finally reached the bottom, he realized that the floor was covered with pavers on solid earth from which the black walls protruded. Blackstone had not been set into the mountain like other houses—it practically grew out of it.

The stairs were followed by a winding corridor, which Jupiter followed only reluctantly, as he had the feeling that he was once again at the mercy of a bad joke by the architect. But nowhere a skeleton popped up. There were several doors on both left and right. Jupiter opened them one after the other—a wine cellar, a storage cellar—and finally the boiler room where the water was heated. Large pipes led from the wall into the heating system and from there back into the wall to supply all water connections in the house through the thick walls.

Jupiter examined the pipe connections, but he saw no way to open the inflow or manipulate it in any way. Wherever the blood had entered the pipes, it had not been here. He wanted to see if he could follow the inflow pipe and left the room.

In the adjacent room, there was some old dusty furniture. The water pipe ran along the ceiling. But strangely enough, it seemed to come out of the wall in a different place. Jupiter frowned in irritation. These crazy crooked rooms disturbed his sense of orientation quite considerably!

Jupe went back to the boiler room. It was difficult for him to picture the plan of the basement rooms—the water pipe was shifted by a good distance. In general, one metre of the room seemed to be missing. Either the wall was unbelievably thick and the pipe made a kink inside, or else...

Jupiter took a closer look at the wall. Also here in the basement, all walls were made of the same deep black stone as the façade of the house. Even the joints were black. The First Investigator groped across the spaces between the individual stones—and suddenly felt a depression where none should have been.

He looked closer. There was a gap between the stones that had been almost invisible due to the blackness of the surroundings. This gap framed a rectangle about the size of a man. Jupe suspected something. He put his flashlight down and braced himself against the wall. Groaning, the gap swung inwards and opened up to a dark space. It was another entrance to the underworld.

14. Beneath Blackstone

“I wonder if Jupiter has found anything in the meantime?” Pete asked himself after they had spent half an hour in Mr Moore’s study. They had gone through all the papers in the Blackstone folder. There was no longer any doubt about Bob’s discovery.

“Then he would have already told us. Come on, let’s go and find him!” Bob suggested. “We absolutely must tell him this incredible news! He’ll be surprised.”

“But we’ll do it very dramatically, okay?” rejoiced the Second Investigator. “We’ll put him in suspense—so that he is on the receiving end this time.”

They set out to find Jupiter.

“He’s not here,” Pete said as they entered the bathroom.

“Probably looking for the water connection in the basement,” Bob surmised and they went downstairs to the ground floor.

“Creepy door,” Pete noted when they were standing outside the basement entrance. He opened it and looked down the stairs, which led into absolute darkness after only a few steps.

“Jupe?” Pete called out.

No answer.

“Probably one of his jokes,” the Second Investigator growled reluctantly.

“Who knows how big the basement is. Maybe he didn’t hear us.” Bob switched on his flashlight and went down the first steps. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I don’t know,” Pete replied reluctantly.

“It’s just a basement,” Bob said, repeating Jupiter’s reassurance formula without knowing it. “It won’t be any scarier than the rest of the house.”

“All right,” Pete agreed.

Together they descended the stairs and entered each room one by one. But Jupiter was nowhere to be found.

“You know, Bob, I just had a thought.”

“Huh?”

“Mr X may have been hiding in the basement after putting the maggots and worms in the kitchen cabinet. Maybe he was down here. He could...” Pete swallowed. “He might even still be hiding here.”

“Don’t scare me, Pete.”

“But it’s true, isn’t it? We didn’t even think about the basement.”

“Right. But you’re wrong, you see—there’s nobody here.” Bob opened the last door and as expected the room was empty.

Pete breathed again. “Thank goodness. But where is Jupe? Come on, let’s check upstairs again. This basement gives me the creeps. I don’t want to stay here any longer than necessary.”

They returned to the stairs and then entered every single room on the ground floor. The First Investigator was nowhere to be found.

“I don’t believe it!” Pete exclaimed.

“What’s that about the suspense? We have to find Jupe first. Maybe he’s outside,” thought Bob. “Wait here, I’ll go see.”

He disappeared. Pete wandered around the house. It would be dark in an hour and then a long night would begin in the haunted house. He was sure he wouldn't sleep a second. He was just in the library when Bob came back.

"Nothing," Bob said, shaking his head. "Jupe is gone. But his bike is still there. So he must be close by."

"Do you think he went into the forest?"

Bob was about to reply when something creaked nearby. It sounded as if wood scratched over stone.

"Bob!" cried Pete, pointing to the floor-to-ceiling bookcase. "The wall! It's moving!"

In fact, part of the shelf swung open slowly and revealed a dark opening. Panic-stricken, Pete looked around and grabbed a small bronze statue, which he clasped tightly and headed for the secret door.

"Surprise!" The First Investigator stepped forward with his flashlight in his hand—and flinched when he saw Pete, who had almost hit him over the head.

"Jupe!" cried the Second Investigator and let the statue sink in relief. "Where... where did you come from? What is that secret door?"

"One of many!" replied Jupiter excitedly. "You will not believe what I have discovered! You gotta see this!"

"We've been looking for you," Bob said. "Have you been behind that shelf the whole time?"

Jupe shook his head. "I've been everywhere. I even overheard you in the study."

"Overheard?" Pete asked.

"Yes, Blackstone is full of secret tunnels!" The First Investigator told the two of them his discovery in the boiler room. "I followed a narrow passageway and came to a ladder. It was pretty hard to get up there. Finally I found myself in a whole network of narrow tunnels. There are doors in various places, which probably lead to the individual rooms of the house. I haven't tried them all."

"That's incredible!" cried Bob, fascinated.

"Come on, come on, I haven't seen everything by a long shot. It's easy to get lost and I didn't want to risk it."

"Wait, let me just get a little more light." Bob switched on his flashlight. "Here we go!"

"What if we can't get out of this?" Pete asked.

"Nonsense. Can't you see I got out too?" Jupiter said.

"Well..." The Second Investigator desperately searched for arguments, but he could not think of anything. "All right."

Pete took his flashlight, then they followed Jupiter into the dark tunnel and closed the secret door from inside. The tunnel was so narrow that they had to walk one behind the other. Their steps echoed eerily from the stone walls. Every few metres, the tunnel made a sharp bend or led them to a turn-off, so that after a very short time they didn't know exactly where they were.

Pete feared a nasty surprise behind every bend. At any moment they could run into Curb's arms. Or the Fire Demon. Or a trapdoor opened and let them fall into the depths. He was thinking about the skeleton in the corridor. Perhaps there was a similar mechanism in these tunnels, one that made poisoned arrows shoot out of the wall like in an Indiana Jones movie.

"It's spooky here," Pete whispered. "Just be careful up there, Jupe!"

"I think we just solved another mystery," whispered Bob. "I now know the real reason why Blackstone has such crooked rooms—and why it is difficult to find your way around

them. Bruce Black designed the interior of the house to hide the secret tunnels. Since there are no right angles, no one notices that the walls are over a metre thick.”

“And so nobody would think that they could be hollow,” Jupiter added. Then he stopped abruptly. “Watch out, it’s a long way down.”

The First Investigator shone down. In front of them was a narrow hole in the ground. A metal ladder was firmly anchored in the wall and led down as well as up through an opening in the ceiling.

“That’s the way to the first floor,” said the First Investigator. “But we want to go down.”

He climbed up the ladder and disappeared into the depths shortly afterwards. Bob and Pete followed him into the basement.

“I haven’t really looked around here yet,” Jupe said. “When I discovered the ladder, I immediately climbed up.”

“The tunnels are much wider,” Pete noted. “No wonder, now they don’t have to be hidden in the walls. I wonder if Mr Moore knows about this.”

“At least he didn’t mention any of this when we were considering how Mr X could enter the house unseen,” Jupiter reminded us. “Maybe he really doesn’t know.”

“Why did Black create those tunnels in the first place?” Pete asked.

“To give the spirits their own living space,” joked Bob. “Or just for the fun of it. If I had the money to build my own house, I would also create some secret tunnels. That’s funny.”

“That’s right, Bob,” Jupe agreed with him. “Looking at Blackstone, it would actually be a miracle if the house didn’t have secret tunnels. We really could have thought of it sooner.”

He turned left. “Over there is the boiler room. If you follow these water pipes fixed along the walls here, you will see that at one point over there...” Jupe shone his flashlight ahead, “that is a supply line to one water pipe. Next to it is a huge canister in which remains of the blood still stick. That was how Mr X fed the blood to the shower in the bathroom. This also proves that Mr X knows these tunnels and how the water pipes run. Mr X could very well be Curb. By the way, did you find out his address?”

“The sender of his letters only gave a P. O. Box address,” Pete replied. “Say, don’t you think we’d better turn back? After all, Curb could show up here any minute. And it’s Halloween. He’s probably up to something. Possibly...” he swallowed. “He may even be here already.”

“First I want to know where this tunnel leads to. Somehow Curb has to get in here. There must be an entrance from outside the house. And I want to find it. There’s still light outside. I don’t think Curb is here yet.” The First Investigator lifted his flashlight and went right into the tunnel, which he had not been yet.

“I don’t know, Jupe,” Pete tried to hold him back. “What if he is here? Or if we get lost?”

“This place is not that big,” said Jupiter reassuringly and continued slowly. The walls were built of the same black stone as the rest of the house and shimmered in the light of the flashlights in some places. After about ten metres, the tunnel made a bend to the left.

They went another ten metres further. After the third bend, they passed the opening leading to the boiler room. And finally they reached the ladder from which they had started. At a loss they remained standing there.

“Someone is pulling our leg,” Jupiter suspected.

“A prank? Why?” Pete asked.

“No man builds a tunnel that leads around in circles.”

“Bruce Black does,” Pete objected. “I think this tunnel fits Blackstone. He’s as illogical as the whole house. Hey!” The Second Investigator put his index finger to his lips and hissed, “I heard something!”

Jupiter and Bob listened.

“You heard fleas coughing,” Bob said after a while.

“No! There really was something there! It’s a... It’s a voice! It sounded kind of... ghostly.”

Jupiter frowned and set about replying. But then he heard it too. A soft sound came from far away. It was a voice to them, muffled and disembodied.

It sounded like a ghost!

15. The Lost Treasure

“Who is that?” Pete asked anxiously.

“Curb?” Bob whispered.

“With that voice?” Pete doubted. “Perhaps... it’s a ghost! Someone who was murdered by Bruce Black many years ago and now haunts this place. Blackstone is not in the right direction, I knew that from the beginning! Today is Halloween!”

“Don’t get upset, Pete! We will get to the bottom of this.” Jupe set off and climbed to the ground floor. The shouting got louder. But what the voice said was beyond comprehension.

“It’s coming from inside the house,” whispered the First Investigator and crept back through the narrow tunnel to the secret door leading into the library. When they stood in front of the back of the bookcase, the shouting had stopped.

“Now what?” whispered Pete.

“We’ll check it out!” Jupiter pressed against the wall. It swung open silently. They had spent more time in the secret tunnels than they had thought. The sun had already set. It was almost dark in the library. They switched off their flashlights and went to the door to listen.

“Someone’s creeping across the hall!” hissed Bob.

“Let’s get him!” Jupiter took a deep breath, counted quietly to three and ripped open the door.

There was a demon in the hall. A blood-red devil grinned at them. Pete cried out and jumped back. The demon screamed, too. Then it laughed—a relieved laugh.

“There you are!”

Astonished, The Three Investigators looked at it. “Roxanne?”

“Who else?” returned the eerie creature. “Oh, the mask!” Roxanne tore the devil’s face off.

Pete breathed a sigh of relief. “You scared me! Are you out of your senses? What are you doing here? Weren’t you planning to stay home today at all costs?”

“I couldn’t take it anymore. It’s Halloween, I just had to know what was going on here tonight. So I told my mum I was staying at a friend’s house, and I came here. I just wanted to shock you a little with the mask. But nobody responded to my knocking, so I climbed through the window and called out for you. Where have you been? I just checked the mask room.”

“So it was you,” moaned Pete. “Jupe has made an incredible discovery.” He told her the whole story.

“A secret tunnel!” Roxanne marvelled.

“We were just about to examine it,” Jupiter added.

“I’m in!” she shouted enthusiastically.

Together they returned to the underground tunnel system.

“It’s pretty scary here,” Roxanne remarked.

Their enthusiasm had suddenly disappeared when the secret door behind them had fallen shut.

“Indeed,” Pete agreed with her. “Tell me, where did your sudden change of heart come from? Didn’t you swear never to set foot in Blackstone again, especially not today?”

“Yeah... It was then,” Roxanne confessed. “But... I don’t know. Tonight’s the night. I’m terribly afraid, but still I can’t miss this. If the Fire Demon really shows up, I want to see him!”

“Even though you’re afraid of him?” Pete asked.

“Yes. If I’ll ever have the chance to see a real demon, it’ll be here and now.”

After climbing into the basement, they stood in the tunnel again, which ran in a circle.

“I am convinced that there is another hidden entrance here,” said Jupiter. “Otherwise, this walk makes no sense at all. Come on, guys, tap the walls on the left! There must be another room hidden inside this wall!”

Four of them poked against the stone and worked their way metre by metre. After the second bend Bob finally succeeded.

“Here,” he whispered. “It sounds different here!”

Soon they had found out the exact dimensions of the secret door by knocking. As Bob got very close, he discovered the narrow gap on the wall. “So how do we get it to open?”

“Like the other one,” Jupiter suggested and braced himself against the wall. Nothing moved. “Give me a hand!”

Four of them tried, but even with their combined forces they achieved nothing. The wall did not move at all.

“What a bummer,” Bob cursed softly. “There must be a way to open this thing!”

“Maybe there’s a hidden mechanism,” Pete thought and leaned exhausted against the opposite wall. He uttered a horrified scream and jumped to the side when the stone his hand had touched suddenly gave way. The black rock had slipped about five centimetres into the wall. A muffled rumble sounded.

“What have I done?” he asked, startled. The secret door was pushed to the outside and finally opened slowly. Behind it was a black hole.

“Pete!” cried Juve. “You have just discovered the hidden mechanism!”

“Good work, Pete!” said Bob, acknowledging and patting him on the back.

“What? I...” Pete gasped.

Bob laughed. “Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while!”

“Wow!” Roxanne breathed deeply as she lit the hole with her flashlight. “A staircase! It goes even deeper into the underworld!”

“There must be goblins down there,” Bob mocked. “They’ve been waiting for centuries for you to walk into their trap.”

Roxanne threw a venomous look at him, but did not respond.

“No goblins, Bob,” contradicted the First Investigator. “Something much better. I think I know what’s waiting for us down there.”

“The Fire Demon?” Pete asked anxiously.

Jupiter smiled. “With any luck, him too. Come on!” He descended the steps. The others followed him.

After a few steps Roxanne suddenly cried out. The Second Investigator froze with fright. “What? What is it?”

“Nothing,” she replied in a trembling voice. “There was just a spider right under my nose.”

Bob and Jupiter gave each other meaningful looks, sighed at the same time and continued on their way. After about twenty steps the stairs ended and led into a small, low room. There were no more stone walls here. The chamber had concrete walls. It smelled musty and the walls glittered with moisture.

They saw dozens of metal suitcases scattered everywhere. Some were the size of briefcases, while others were as big as chests.

Jupiter emitted an astonished whistle. "Whatever is stored here is so important to the person that he or she wants to protect it from heat, cold, water, insects and rats."

"What might this be?" Bob thought aloud.

"I think I know," replied Jupiter. "If I'm not mistaken, this is where the lost loot from the Enigma Group raids is located!" He walked towards one of the suitcases, let the latches snap open and opened it.

An old, leather-bound book with a gold hinge came to light.

"Wow! What kind of book is that?" Pete went closer and wanted to open the book, but Jupe held him back.

"Better not," he warned. "Who knows how old this thing is. We may damage it."

"What do you think it is?" Pete asked.

"Probably a European book from the Middle Ages, which the Enigma Group stole from somewhere because they thought it contained incantations, or recipes for potions, who knows."

"A real spell book!" cried Roxanne enthusiastically. The three looked at her and saw that she could hardly control herself from wanting to open it immediately.

"Maybe by an alchemist who figured out how to turn lead into gold!" Bob mocked.

"Hardly," replied Jupiter. "But Black and his people thought they could probably use the book to understand some black magic secrets. Let's see what's in the other boxes!"

They found even more books and old scrolls, all individually wrapped and protected. When Bob opened another suitcase, he went back in surprise—a grim face with bared teeth and flaming hair looked at him.

"The Mask of the Fire Demon!" Bob exclaimed. "I thought it was still at the museum!"

Roxanne looked at the piece more closely and suddenly laughed. "It's the copy by Mrs Goldenberg!"

"Curb must have left it here so he could have it ready for Halloween night," Jupiter said. "This really is a real treasure trove. The rightful owners would be happy when they finally get their valuable possessions back after all these years. But for now, let's leave this stuff here so Curb doesn't suspect anything."

Jupiter closed the suitcases and they left the room. The secret door could be closed without any problem. No one would know they'd been here.

This time they left the underground tunnel through the entrance that Jupiter had discovered in the boiler room and climbed up the stairs. As they stood in the corridor and the basement door behind them closed by itself, Pete breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to be out of there."

"It was so exciting," Bob thought.

"It was, but also creepy," Roxanne commented.

"Let's go back up to the mask room," suggested Jupiter, who couldn't wait to discuss all the details of their discovery.

"Just a minute!" said Roxanne and walked down the hall in the opposite direction. She took a candle from a candlestick, opened the front door and lit the pumpkin-head lanterns that lined the outer banister. When she returned, she smiled sheepishly. "Better safe than sorry."

They went into the mask room and sat around the table in the glow of the chandelier.

"You always have to be one step ahead of us, Jupe," moaned Pete. "We've made the most amazing discovery ever, but of course you can't think of anything better than to top it and find a lost treasure."

“What discovery?” asked Jupiter and Roxanne at the same time.

Now the Second Investigator grinned. “Bob found something in Moore’s study that’ll blow your mind.”

“A revelation that puts the matter in a whole new light,” Bob confirmed. “A truth, so to speak, that reopens the whole case.”

“Something spectacular,” Pete added. “Which you would never expect.”

“The answer to a puzzle we never knew existed,” Bob continued.

The First Investigator rolled his eyes. “Come on!”

Bob and Pete smiled at each other.

“It’s your discovery, Bob, you tell him.”

“Wouldn’t you rather, Pete?”

“No, no, this is too much of an honour.”

“All right,” Bob finally began. “In one of the files, I found letters from a notary public. These letters clearly prove that Mr Moore has been lying to us. He did not buy this house.”

Jupiter frowned. “What do you mean? Blackstone’s not even his?”

“Yes, it is his,” Bob said. “But he didn’t pay a cent for it.”

“Then what?”

“He inherited it.”

“How—”

“Aaron Moore,” Bob interrupted him, “is Bruce Black’s son.”

16. The Realm of the Dead

Jupiter woke up in a sweat. It was dark. His back was hurting. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. Then his memory came back. He was at Blackstone—in the mask room. All evening, The Three Investigators and Roxanne had been talking about the case, discussing it from all sides and making the wildest assumptions.

Jupiter had to admit that the lively conversation had also served to distract them. Everyone was nervous. It was Halloween night and they sensed something was going to happen.

But it had remained calm. Hour after hour, nothing had moved in Blackstone. At some point, they had gradually fallen asleep. Jupiter remembered that he had been the last one awake and had looked out from the window to the cemetery.

Then he must have dozed off too. The First Investigator listened. He heard the deep, quiet breaths of Bob, Pete and Roxanne next to him. What had he woken up from? The fading images of a nightmare buzzed through his head. A mask. A grave. Flames. After such dreams, he usually could not fall asleep again. Sighing, he lifted himself up and went to the window. The moon transformed the meadow into a grey surface from which the tombstones stood out dark and threatening.

Had a dream actually woken him up from his sleep? Or maybe there was a shadow? Or a sound? The plastic sheet in front of the window rustled softly. Nothing else could be heard.

There was something creaking above him. Jupiter raised his head. It fell silent. The wood? Or a mouse? If he wasn't mistaken, the study was above him. On tiptoe, not to wake the others, he sneaked out of the room into the corridor and stopped at the foot of the stairs. Not a sound was heard.

Nevertheless, Jupiter felt uncomfortable. He had the impression that he was being watched. Step by step he felt his way up in the dark. Finally, he stood at the door to the study. He waited half a minute, but there was silence. He opened the door in a sudden. The room was empty. Jupiter breathed again. He was probably mistaken. Blackstone made him nervous, especially on Halloween night.

The First Investigator would never have admitted it in front of the others, but even he sometimes felt as if the house was alive in a strange way—as if things were actually going on here that even the infallible logic of Jupiter Jones could not explain.

Slowly he entered the room. The masks on the wall gave him cold looks. In the pale moonlight that fell through the window, the wooden faces seemed to move. Jupiter suppressed the thought and went over to the file shelf. He picked out the Blackstone folder and sat down at the desk.

The moonlight fell directly onto the table top so he did not have to light a candle. Jupiter looked for the documents Bob had discovered and checked them. There was no doubt—Bruce Black was indeed Moore's father.

Why didn't Mr Moore tell them this? Why did he claim he bought the house? He had to know about his father's criminal past. Did he also know that for over two years a treasure had been hidden under his house? Is that why he kept so much from The Three Investigators?

And who was hiding behind the name Curb? How did he know about the secret tunnel? Why did he want Blackstone so bad? He could not be concerned about the hidden treasures, otherwise he would have made them disappear long ago.

Jupiter reached for a notepad. He had to make up his mind. Maybe that helped his rusty brain. Who played a role in this mystery? Jupiter wrote:

Aaron Moore
Enigma
Bruce Black
E. Curb

He took the note in his hand, went to the window and looked out. Also from here, he could see the cemetery. Only one of those graves was real—Bruce Black's. Jupiter looked at his note again. Suddenly he winced.

Bruce... E. Curb...

He rushed out of the room and ran down the stairs. On his way through the dark corridor he forgot the trigger mechanism under the carpet in excitement. Bruce the skeleton jumped out and swung his scythe aggressively.

"Bruce," Jupiter was pleased. "You are the answer to the puzzle!" He stowed the skeleton back in the coffin, ran on to the mask room and ripped open the door.

"Hey, you! Wake up!"

Bob did not respond. Pete, on the other hand, immediately startled and looked around in confusion. "What? What's wrong? Can you repeat the question?"

"Give me the binomial distribution formula," joked Jupiter. "Hey, Pete, wake up! You're not in school."

"What?" Pete asked again.

"Jupiter? Is he around? The Fire Demon?" Roxanne was now awake as well.

Jupiter reached for his lighter and lit a candle. Now Bob was moving too.

"Wake up, people! I have news!"

"News?" moaned Bob. "Jupe! Can't it wait till tomorrow morning?"

"No, I can't."

"Why are you up? Has something happened?" Pete asked. He was still fighting sleep.

"Indeed. I've been thinking," Jupiter said.

"You do this all the time," Bob remarked. "I warn you, Jupiter Jones. If it's nothing really important, I'll kill you!"

"It's important. We must dig Bruce Black's grave!" Jupiter cried.

Pete and Bob threw a confused look at each other, then Pete asked: "Are you completely crazy now? Are you possessed by Blackstone's evil spirits, or what?"

"No. I have reason to believe that Bruce Black is still alive."

"What are you saying?" cried Roxanne.

"Watch out," Jupiter started and slumped down on the sofa. "All this time I've wondered who Mr Curb really is. He wants this house bad. And more importantly, he knows Blackstone's secrets. I don't think he discovered the tunnels by accident. And that narrows down the circle of suspects tremendously. Actually, only the former members of the Enigma Group come into question. They're the only ones who can know about the tunnels. But as we have learned from the newspapers, they are all still in prison. So that leaves only one, which we have so far ignored, because we thought he was dead."

“But Bruce Black is dead,” Roxanne contradicted. “Right outside the door you can visit his grave.”

“What if he faked his death to avoid the police who were trying to arrest him?” Jupiter suggested.

“How is this gonna work?” Bob wanted to know. “The best you can do is disappear without a trace. But when you’re dead, you’re examined. The cause of death is determined, a death certificate is issued. No one can fake that.”

“I don’t know how he managed that,” Jupiter remarked. “But out there in the cemetery is the proof. I bet you Bruce Black’s grave is empty.”

“There could be someone else hiding behind Curb,” Bob said. “For example, one of the masons who built Blackstone back then. Black will hardly have built the house all by himself. What makes you think he’s Curb of all people?”

“Because I don’t think this is a coincidence,” replied Jupiter and held the note under Bob’s nose.

“What is not a coincidence?” Bob asked impatiently.

“The names! If you read Bruce backwards, you get ‘E. Curb’!”

Pete and Roxanne slid over and also took a look at the note.

“Indeed,” she said, stunned.

“Bruce Black is not dead. And to prove this, we will dig this grave,” said Jupiter in a tone of voice that tolerated no contradiction.

“Now?” cried Pete in horror. “In the middle of the night?”

“Whether day or night, that doesn’t change the contents of the grave,” Jupiter said calmly.

“But... it’s Halloween!” cried Roxanne.

“So what?” Jupiter exclaimed.

“You cannot possibly dig a grave on Halloween night!” Roxanne cried. “You’ll invoke the evil powers!”

“Dear Roxanne,” the First Investigator began quietly. “I know you see the world with different eyes. For me it doesn’t matter if it’s Halloween or not or if the sun is shining outside or the moon. We need proof. And I know how to get it!”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Pete whispered again and again as he walked restlessly up and down the dewy meadow between the tombstones. He constantly looked over to the edge of the forest and feared being attacked by a horde of zombies every second.

Bob and Jupiter dug a hole with two spades that they had found in the basement. They were already up to their knees in the hollow. Fortunately, the moon was so bright that they could see enough.

“You are insane!” hissed Roxanne repeatedly. She stood next to the grave and talked to them since they had started the work. “I know you don’t believe me, but the wall between worlds is disappearing!”

She looked at the clock. “In ten minutes, it’ll be twelve! This is the most magical moment of the whole year! This grave belongs to the realm of the dead, the living have no business there, especially not on this night! You will incur the eternal wrath of the spirits if you continue!”

“If Mr Moore finds out we’re digging up his father, he’ll kill us!” Pete muttered nervously. “What we’re doing here is desecration of graves—isn’t that a crime?”

“Only if it’s a real grave,” Jupiter replied gasping.

“And your spirits, Roxanne, can leave me alone,” Bob added angrily.

“By the way, a thought just occurred to me that supports my theory,” said Jupiter. “This grave is completely neglected. The tombstone is crooked, there are no flowers, no grave light, nothing. Is this how you would treat your father’s final resting place?” He did not wait for the Second Investigator’s answer. “Unless, of course, he knew that there is nothing down there at all.”

“But wait a minute!” cried Pete. “None of this makes any sense! If Bruce Black is the father of Moore and is in fact still alive—why would he play the Fire Demon and scare his son?”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter confessed. “Who knows what kind of family drama is going on. I’m not sure Moore knows his father is alive either. But hopefully we’ll find out all about that.”

Roxanne didn’t seem to be listening at all. She stamped her foot furiously and shouted hysterically, “Why are you dragging me into this?”

Bob leaned on his spade and sparkled challengingly at Roxanne. “We didn’t drag you into anything! You put us on this case! And you showed up here so you wouldn’t miss anything! You can leave if you don’t like it.”

“Are you crazy?” she said to him. “I can’t go home alone now!”

“Then go into the house!” Bob shouted back.

“In this haunted house? All alone? At midnight?” Roxanne cried.

“You can take Pete with you.” Furiously, Bob resumed work.

“I’m staying here,” said the Second Investigator quickly, although he would have preferred to be in his bed at that moment. But he wouldn’t admit that in front of the others.

“Hold it, folks. I think I’ve got something,” said Jupiter when his spade hit something hard. Carefully he continued to dig and gradually uncovered a large wooden surface—the lid of the coffin.

“It’s pretty much rotten,” he said.

“I don’t even want to know what it looks like inside. But what do we do if you’re wrong, Juve?” Pete asked. “What if it does contain Bruce Black? Completely decomposed, half carcass and—”

“Stop it, Pete!” Jupiter snapped. “You’re driving me crazy!”

“And with white maggots crawling everywhere,” Pete quietly finished his sentence.

“You must not open the coffin!” Roxanne tried again. “Absolutely not! The spirits—”

“You’re the one who lit the pumpkin lanterns,” Bob interrupted her. “They should be chasing away all the ghosts!”

It took them another ten minutes to expose the coffin enough to open it.

“Let’s do it then,” Juve said determinedly.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Pete announced.

“You don’t have to look,” Juve said.

“I’m not going to.” The Second Investigator turned demonstratively.

“I can’t get the lid off,” Bob moaned, strained.

“This is a sign,” Roxanne was sure. “Last warning! Close up the coffin and bury it again!”

Bob ignored them. “He probably nailed it. Wait, I’ll use the spade as a crowbar.”

Wood splintered, then Pete heard the coffin being opened. Roxanne screamed with all her might.

The Second Investigator flinched. “What? Is he inside? Is he in?” He couldn’t stand it any longer, spun around and looked into the coffin.

It was full of stones.

“No body,” Bob said with relief. “For goodness’ sake, Roxanne, what were you screaming about?”

She stood there stiff as a poker and looked in a completely different direction. Trembling, she pointed to the edge of the forest and whispered in panic: “Here he comes! The Fire Demon! He’s coming here!”

17. Fiery Finale

The Three Investigators turned around. The silhouette of the forest stood out in deep black against the starry night sky. But a shadow had come loose from this black wall. He floated like a phantom in a waving cloud towards the cemetery.

“My goodness!” Pete gasped. “Let’s get out of here!”

No one moved, each for different reasons—Roxanne was stiff with fright, Jupiter waited curiously, Bob was undecided and Pete didn’t want to run away alone.

The figure came closer. The waving cloud became a bulging cloak. And finally a face peeled out of the shadow in the moonlight.

“Mr Moore!” cried Jupiter in surprise.

“What are you doing?” Moore yelled at them furiously. “What is the meaning of this? Are you out of your senses?”

“I had nothing to do with it,” Roxanne affirmed. “I tried to stop them, but they wouldn’t listen to me!”

“We have opened Bruce Black’s grave to confirm a suspicion,” Jupiter calmly explained.

“Suspicious? You must be out of your mind! Bruce Black is—“

“Not dead,” the First Investigator interrupted him before Moore could get back into hysterics. “He faked his death to escape the police.” He pointed to the coffin filled with stones. “Here is the proof.”

“What are you doing here anyway?” Bob asked. “You were not supposed to be released from the hospital until tomorrow.”

“I can’t hide any longer,” Moore replied soundlessly as he stared into the coffin with stones. “I have incurred the wrath of the Fire Demon and will not escape it. No one commits a crime against the spirits with impunity. I have to face my fate. That’s why I came back. And now...” He faltered. His eyes, still fixed on the coffin, widened.

Whispering hoarsely, he continued: “... now Bruce Black has left his grave.”

“He didn’t leave it,” Jupiter contradicted indignantly. “He was never in it. Haven’t you been listening to me? Bruce Black is—“

“He walks the earth as an undead,” Mr Moore said, “You have disturbed his calm. Now the revenge of the spirits will strike you too.”

The First Investigator cleared his throat. “Mr Moore, let’s get back down to earth, please. There’s strong evidence that this grave was empty from the start.” He took a meaningful break. “No one would let his own father’s grave deteriorate like this.”

Now Moore finally looked up. He frowned. “His father?”

“You are Bruce Black’s son!” Jupiter hurled at him. Then he dared to take a shot in the dark: “You knew from the beginning that he was still alive, didn’t you? What does all this Fire Demon spell really mean?”

Moore stared at him stunned. “What are you talking about?”

“Stop playing games, Mr Moore!” demanded Jupiter. “Just tell us.”

Roxanne’s shrill shriek interrupted him. “The Fire Demon! There!”

They whirled around. In the flickering glow of pumpkin heads that lit up Blackstone’s entrance, a black figure stood and looked motionlessly over at them. The light of the lanterns

was swallowed by the dark, formless body.

Only the face surrounded by frozen flames shimmered—the mask of the Fire Demon!

“That’s him!” gasped Mr Moore. “The hour of vengeance has come!”

“It’s just a masquerade,” claimed Jupiter, but he too was no longer at ease at the sight of the eerie figure. “This supposed demon is none other than Bruce Black! He could never really light fire—”

The roar of flames cut him off. The demon had raised his left arm. A jet of fire shot out of his hand and set fire to one of the pumpkins. Pete and Roxanne screamed.

“Get out of here!” Bob and Jupiter climbed out of the grave and stared over at the house. They got ready to run in case of emergency.

A second jet of flame shot out and ignited another pumpkin head. Then the Fire Demon started to move. His body seemed to flow. With every step down the stairs he glided down, there was a new burst of fire, until finally all the pumpkins burned brightly.

“He’s coming towards us!” cried Pete. “Get out of here!”

“I have to face him,” Moore said and slowly walked towards the Fire Demon.

“Stay here!” cried Pete. “He will burn you!”

“It is my destiny,” Moore claimed and continued on his way.

“Come, fellas, we must help him!” Jupiter decided and followed the writer. Bob joined him while Pete hesitated for a moment. But finally he too ran after them.

Halfway between cemetery and house the demon stopped. “Aaron Moore!” The voice sounded darkly distorted, like an echo from another world. “You have awoken the spirits of Blackstone and angered them!”

“Yes! Yes!” Moore whimpered.

“You have awakened the Fire Demon! You will leave this place and never return or forever burn in my fire!” Again hissing flames struck out from his hands. “Blackstone belongs to the spirits now. No one who enters the house after tonight will ever leave it alive again.”

“Stop this silly performance, Mr Black!” Jupiter interrupted him. “Nobody believes in your Fire Demon!”

The rigid mask turned to the First Investigator and growled: “You doubt the power of the spirits?” The figure raised his arms and sent two bursts of fire into the sky. At the same moment, roaring flames shot up from Blackstone’s battlements. The house was on fire. Behind the two towers and on the roof it was blazing so bright and hot that the three detectives and Mr Moore raised their hands and retreated defensively.

“My house!” Moore gasped.

“It is my house!” yelled the Fire Demon and took a step towards them. “Go! And never return!”

The flames above the roof roared even higher and the heat wave drove them back further and further. Again fire shot out of the black figure, this time the flames were aimed directly at them, but they didn’t get far enough to hurt them.

“This is my last warning!” Step by step they walked backwards towards the edge of the forest.

Suddenly Jupiter saw a shadow appeared behind the Demon and approached him crouching. It held something long in its hands. When the fire creature raised its arms again and laughed devilishly, the shadow suddenly jumped forward, swung out and struck the Demon down with a well-aimed blow.

Groaning, the Demon collapsed and lay motionless in the grass. At the same moment the flames on Blackstone went out.

Suddenly everything was quiet. Only the pumpkin heads cracked and crackled softly as they slowly disintegrated to ashes.

“Roxanne!” cried Peter and ran towards the girl. “How did you... how did you do that?”

“Quick, help me before he gets up again,” she cried and, frightened by her own actions, dropped the wooden club.

The Three Investigators pounced on the motionless figure. Jupiter ripped the mask off his head. An almost bald, round face appeared. His body, which had looked like billowing smoke, was nothing more than a black cloak of light fabric fluttering in the wind. Pete and Bob sacrificed their belts to tie the man’s arms and legs.

“Wow,” Bob said appreciatively. “That was quite an achievement, Roxanne. Why were you suddenly behind him?”

“I ran away as soon as he appeared,” she laughed nervously. “And then I sneaked up behind him.”

“But... but where did you get the courage to hunt down a real demon?” Pete marvelled.

“It wasn’t a demon,” she said.

“Huh? I thought you believed in—” Pete began.

“I saw his shoes,” Roxanne interrupted. “As he approached you, his shoes came out from under his cloak. Real demons don’t wear shoes.”

Jupiter laughed. “And I thought you’d never seen one before.”

18. Revelations

A quarter of an hour later, they were sitting in the mask room. Pete and Bob sat on the red sofa, Roxanne brought Mr Moore a soothing tea and Jupiter ran up and down in front of the chair to which they had tied the unconscious man.

Under his cloak some things had come to light—two home-made flame throwers fed by a gas can on his back and a small remote control with which he had used to control the bursts of fire on the roof of Blackstone.

“It’s really Bruce Black,” Moore kept stammering as he let his tea get cold. “He’s alive!”

This time Jupiter believed his bewilderment. And he noticed very clearly that Moore said ‘Bruce Black’.

Roxanne suggested that they call the police immediately. But the First Investigator wanted to defer it until after he had uncovered the last secrets of the case.

Finally, the man moved. Moaning he opened his eyes and wanted to move—but the shackles prevented him from doing so.

“I’m glad you’re finally awake, Mr Black,” Jupiter said calmly.

It took a while before Mr Black was really quite sane. But then he squinted angrily and stared at them. “Which one of you hit me—”

“Me!” cried Roxanne proudly. “Sorry about the bump, but I had no choice.”

Black’s eyes fell on Mr Moore. “It’s not me you should go after, it’s him,” he shouted angrily. “That con man!”

“Con man?” echoing Moore disbelieving. “Me?”

“Don’t let him fool you! He lied to everyone!” Mr Black cried. “Or are you in cahoots with him?”

“Take it easy,” said Jupiter and raised his hand reassuringly. “And one by one. Before we clarify who has lied to whom and when and why, I want to have some answers first. Let me see if I can get the whole story together.

“Two years ago, the Enigma Group of which you were the leader was caught trying to steal the mask of the Fire Demon. You escaped, faked your own death. How did you do that?”

At first, it seemed as if Black didn’t want to answer. But finally he growled: “A doctor helped me. He owed me a favour. He diagnosed my death by poison, issued a death certificate and organized the funeral. So it was no problem to have the coffin filled with stones. By then I was long gone.”

The First Investigator nodded. “So you went into hiding and you got yourself a new name—Mr E. Curb.”

“And when enough grass had grown over the matter, you returned to buy your old house under that name,” Bob continued. “But why? Wasn’t that too risky?”

“I didn’t care about the risk,” Black replied. “Blackstone is my house! I built it, no one else can live here!”

“You really only cared about your house, not the treasure hidden in the basement?” Pete followed up.

“Treasure?” Moore asked in surprise. “What treasure?”

Pete waved him down. "We'll explain later."

"So you found the secret tunnels," Black said. "No, the treasure was never my concern. Sooner or later, I would have got them back for sure. But Blackstone was more important. This house is a magical place. No one else should ever have moved in here. But then this con man came and took the house! Claims to be my son!"

"So it's not true?" Pete asked in amazement.

"Of course not!" Black sparkled at Moore furiously. They all turned to the writer, who looked down at the ground and restlessly turned the teacup between the palms of his hands.

"Mr Moore?" Jupiter asked. "How can you explain this to us?"

Moore reluctantly replied, "Ever since I first heard about Bruce Black and his house, I was fascinated by it. I read everything about him, followed him, even tried to get into the Enigma Group—but without success. I wrote to Black that I wanted to buy his house, but he always refused. This house has a magical aura... so I wanted it at all costs. Then I heard about Black's death and saw my chance. For a lot of money, I had documents forged that passed me off as his son. Eventually I inherited the house and everything that belonged to him."

"Why didn't you tell us about the Enigma Group's raids?" Pete followed up.

"I didn't want you to get too curious and end up revealing my secret. I had no idea Black was still alive. And I didn't know there were secret tunnels either."

"You used this to prepare your Halloween show after Moore wouldn't sell you the house, didn't you?" Jupiter asked. "But how did you do that? The tunnels under the house have no exit."

"Yes," contradicted Black. "There is a second hidden door in the basement. Behind it is a tunnel leading into the middle of the forest. From there I could enter the house unseen. One night, while I was in here, I discovered Moore's newly completed manuscript of *The Fire Demon*, which he had obviously written after reading my diaries."

"And then you developed a plan to drive him out of the house," Jupiter continued the story. "You watched him, studied his life and finally knew that there was nothing Mr Moore feared more than the things he wrote about in his books. When he was out for a few days, you made all the arrangements. You prepared the windows and set up flame throwers on the roof, which you could ignite by remote control. Hiding the worms in the closet was the least of your problems, thanks to the secret tunnels." Black nodded.

Jupiter turned around satisfied. "Bob, would you call the police?"

"With pleasure!"

"What will become of me?" Moore asked anxiously. "You're not going to tell the police the whole story?"

"Of course we do, Mr Moore!" Pete replied indignantly. "You forged documents and secured Blackstone by devious means. You think you're gonna get off scot-free?"

"Besides, you said yourself you wanted to face your fate," Bob added, leaving the room to make a phone call from the study.

After a short time, he returned smiling and satisfied. "The police will be here any minute." He turned to Roxanne and said, "Well, I guess that's the end of your favourite book series."

Roxanne nodded in disappointment. But then a smile came over her face. "Unless..."

"What?" Bob exclaimed.

"I've never told anyone this, but I once wrote a book on *Demon Zone* myself. Since Mr Moore is now going to be out of the business for a while, I'm sure the publishers would be delighted if they could find a replacement immediately!"

Bob laughed. "I wouldn't be so sure."

"Of course! I have enough ideas. And if I ever run out of ideas, I'll come to you. You've been through so much already, I'm sure there's a lot you can tell me. And then the adventures of The Three Investigators will be published as books. What do you think?"